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JOHN AND MARTHA DANIELS









THE WILDFOWLER  
IN  
SCOTLAND









*The morning flight.*  
by  
Lieut. J. E. Mills. Port. P. H. A.

Walter L. Childs. P. H. A.

# THE WILDCAT IN SCOTLAND

JOHN GULLA MILLAR, F.R.S.E.

Author of 'A Guide to the Wild Game of Scotland'

WITH A TRIBUTE TO THE WILDCAT BY SIR J. E. MILLAR, M.D.

BY SIR J. E. MILLAR, M.D., F.R.S.E., F.R.C.V.S., F.R.C.S., F.R.C.P., F.R.C.O., F.R.C.O.G., F.R.C.O.P., F.R.C.O.D., F.R.C.O.E., F.R.C.O.F., F.R.C.O.I., F.R.C.O.L., F.R.C.O.M., F.R.C.O.N., F.R.C.O.O., F.R.C.O.P., F.R.C.O.Q., F.R.C.O.R., F.R.C.O.S., F.R.C.O.T., F.R.C.O.U., F.R.C.O.V., F.R.C.O.W., F.R.C.O.X., F.R.C.O.Y., F.R.C.O.Z., F.R.C.O.A., F.R.C.O.B., F.R.C.O.C., F.R.C.O.D., F.R.C.O.E., F.R.C.O.F., F.R.C.O.G., F.R.C.O.H., F.R.C.O.I., F.R.C.O.J., F.R.C.O.K., F.R.C.O.L., F.R.C.O.M., F.R.C.O.N., F.R.C.O.O., F.R.C.O.P., F.R.C.O.Q., F.R.C.O.R., F.R.C.O.S., F.R.C.O.T., F.R.C.O.U., F.R.C.O.V., F.R.C.O.W., F.R.C.O.X., F.R.C.O.Y., F.R.C.O.Z.

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The morning flight.  
The Hunter's Tale.



# THE WILDFOWLER

IN

# SCOTLAND

BY  
JOHN GUILLE MILLAIS, F.Z.S. &c.

Author of 'A Breath from the Veldt' 'British Deer and their Horns'  
&c.

*WITH A FRONTISPIECE IN PHOTOGRAVURE AFTER A DRAWING  
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**Dedicated**

TO

MY WIFE





## INTRODUCTION

EVER since the age of nine, when I first began collecting British birds in real earnest, I have made a special study of the pursuit and natural history of the wildfowl that frequent our coasts. In the first instance I was only armed with that enemy of law and order—the catapult; but, two years later, on becoming the possessor of a small 20-bore, my first trips after seabirds were made to the estuaries of the Eden and the Tay. The freedom and unconventionality of the sport fired my youthful imagination and love of adventure, and since those early days I have spent much time in wandering up and down the Northern coasts wherever sport or rare creatures were to be found. In the present volume I have endeavoured to set forth the first results of my experiences. The work deals entirely with the pursuit of ducks found in Scottish waters; and I hope in future volumes to deal exhaustively with the natural history of these ducks and their changes of plumage.

J. G. MILLAIS.





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# THE WILDFOWLER IN SCOTLAND

## CHAPTER I

### A GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF SCOTLAND AS A RESORT OF WILDFOWL

To the all-round sportsman—the man who is familiar with every branch of his art, and who sees in its pursuit something more than the mere pleasure of killing—wildfowling and big-game hunting must ever rank first in point of interest. Widely different as these sports are, they are yet alike in this—that while gratifying the thirst for knowledge, without which, as Nansen says, we cease to be men, they tend to develop the best qualities of manhood, as success in either of them can only be gained by years of hard (and often dangerous) work, keen and constant observation, and self-reliance that is equal to any emergency. This, too, they offer in common—the chance of close association with Nature in all her varying moods, the joy of living in the open air amidst scenes and sights and sounds all unknown to the denizen of the city, and the health of mind and body that comes from exercise under the happiest conditions.

The naturalist (and every true sportsman is a naturalist at heart) is never dull; he cannot be, as long as 'Nature's infinite



book of secrecy' lies open before him. And nowhere more than in wildfowling will he find full gratification of his desires. In punt-shooting, indeed, we seem at times to get into the very heart of Nature as the little boat glides unseen and unheard into the haunts of birds impossible to approach in any other way; and from this point of vantage we watch their movements as they fly or swim about, all undisturbed by the thought of danger.

One winter, while drifting down the estuary of the Scottish Eden amidst big slabs of ice that floated all around, I spied a flock of about fifty black scoters, all on feed; and by simply allowing the punt to take its course with the outgoing tide we drifted—I and my boatman—right into the middle of them, without creating any alarm. Within a few feet of us were birds feeding voraciously, and so regardless were they of our presence that one of them came up with his mouth full of small mussels and began to separate them so close to me that I could have actually touched him with my hand.

And now a word as to the wildfowler's training—the life of the man who has either to earn his bread by his gun, or wishes, for his own satisfaction, to succeed in the chase. He commonly passes first of all though a long course of land-shooting, shore-shooting and flighting, noting carefully the haunts and habits of the various birds with which he has to deal; and not until after he is promoted to the 8-bore or the punt-gun can he hope, as the saying is, to make both ends meet. Meanwhile, absorbed in his work and with little else to think of day by day, he gradually becomes in feeling almost one of the wild creatures amongst whom his life is spent. His nature is subdued to what it works in; the loneliness



THE BEAULY FIRTH. AUTUMN. SHOWING FAVOURITE MALLARD GROUND

of his life, its hardships, and its chill and depressing surroundings sink into his soul, making him gentle and reserved in his outward bearing; he becomes more and more one of a class apart, and though his gains be but small and precarious, the man himself is commonly content with his lot, and would be loth to change it for any other.

To him the howling of the wind in the chimney, or the first flakes of snow drifting across the leaden landscape, are more attractive than the comfort of his fireside; he must be out and off at once to listen for the whistle of the duck overhead, or to peer through the gloom for the pack of wigeon that comes drifting in for shelter. And though within his experience the grandeur of the breakers and the roaring of the gale are varied only by the silence

and the solitude of winter, there is this at least to be said—that for weeks, or it may be months, together his heart is gladdened by the smile of Nature, by ‘the countless dimples of the laughing sea,’ or the play of light and shadow on its ever-changing surface, and he enjoys as few other men ever learn to do the inexpressible beauty of the coming or the departing day.

The professional wildfowler is by no means alone in his preference. Such is the fascination of the sport that a man reared in the lap of luxury and amply provided with this world’s goods is just as apt to be captivated by it as the poorest gunner along the shore. He, too, will accept its hardships without a murmur, and will lie for hours in some wet hole rather than miss the chance at the duck that have again and again outwitted him. Nor will the enthusiasm excited by the capture of some rare specimen abate with advancing years. Even in old age his blood will be stirred by the recollection of that supremely happy moment, and he will long to be at the glorious work again.

Let the hill-stalker exult as he may in his adventures in pursuit of wild sheep and goats, the fowler will insist—and rightly too, I think—that his line of sport is equally full of interest; for not only is his quarry gifted with great intelligence and marvellous sight, but the flat and barren country it frequents is all against the shooter. Even the low shield of boards, behind which he approaches, is often seen by the birds a full mile away. Think, then, of the care and cunning he must exercise if he would elude the vision of a thousand pairs of eyes! His wits must always be at the fullest stretch, and woe betide him if his judgment leads him wrong at any moment of his pursuit. It is the conflict of opposing

intellects, with almost every point in favour of the lower animals, that makes this sport so supremely interesting. Experience, not chance, is the ruling factor; and that means, quickness to observe and skill to interpret even the most trifling indications of what is going on around, unlimited patience, and utter disregard of personal comfort.

It often happens that there are one or two thousand duck and geese before the punter, and after working and waiting for several days he sees at last the chance of a highly successful shot, when suddenly his eye is caught by one small wigeon floating some yards away from the main body. What that means he knows only too well. The little bird may at any moment get up, and by a warning whistle set the whole assemblage on the wing. And now—with this possibility in view—what is to be done? For hours the puntsman may have been lying soaked to the skin in the water that invariably leaks through the floor of the boat. Shall he stay there, waiting till, the watcher's suspicions being set at rest, he swims off to join his companions? or shall he go on, hoping to escape observation, or that the warning note, if uttered, may for once be disregarded? Momentous question this, that only the skilled fowler can answer with any degree of confidence. And many another of equal moment is sure to arise in the course of the puntsman's career. After long and weary watching he may have actually drawn within shot, but, as is only too often the case, just as he is about to fire something happens—some trifling incident that no man could have foreseen, and away goes perhaps his last chance for that day.

Another peculiar circumstance attends the pursuit of wildfowl.



I have stalked and killed many species of big game without any sense of excitement when actually taking the shot, but not so when shooting with the punt-gun. The last second before firing was always one of great nervous tension; and this I find is the experience of others who have keenly followed both sports. The cumbersome nature of the weapon and the chance of the punt catching on a bank or snag are no doubt largely accountable for this state of feeling. But these are only amongst the hundred adverse circumstances which may arise at any moment. In weathering a point, the puntsman may meet the tide and a cross 'jabble' which makes shooting impossible, or the tide may recede so rapidly as to leave him stranded on a small rock from which it is impossible to get away without the puntsman rising and showing himself. Or perhaps another puntsman or a shore-shooter fires a shot, to the serious detriment of the puntsman No 1. Or a bunch of duck may come flying by, and, observing the fowler, may make a sudden dart upwards—an occurrence that always frightens feeding duck, some of whom are sure to be watching their comrades.

Drawbacks, especially frequent in the northern firths, are the sudden appearance of a heron or great black-backed gull who purposely alarms the ducks, and the accidental rising of a seal in their midst. In Scotland, too, the burning of furze, grass, and heather, often takes place in February, which is the best fowling month; and these fires, suddenly blazing up along the shores, cause great and frequent disturbance. Last, but not least, of all misfortunes, the gun may miss fire.

All these contretemps, however, tend to make the gunner what



he is—quick of resource, patient, and resolute to the end. Danger there certainly is, and probably more in Scottish waters than in any others, owing principally to the extremes of wind and tide which so frequently beset the puntsman. There the prevailing wind is west, and this, like the east wind, is almost invariably a safe and steady



THE BEAULV FIRTH DURING THE SEVERE WINTER OF 1894

one to work in; but a wind from the north or the south (especially the latter) too often brings with it such terrific squalls that the punt can make no headway against it even on sound poling ground, and there is no small danger of being blown out to sea. This happened to two well-known professional gunners, one on the Moray in 1886,

and the other on the Forth in 1888. I too, in 1891, narrowly escaped a like catastrophe.

My puntsman, Hugh Smith, and I were 'setting' to a small pack of wigeon in Munlochy Bay (one of the worst places in which to meet these gales) when a sudden squall struck us and drove the punt backwards. We knelt up to face it, and strained every nerve to retain our ground, but in spite of all our efforts we were being rapidly driven off the poling ground, out to sea. In desperation Smith jumped into the water, and hung on to the boat with all his might; and presently, following his example, I too jumped overboard. The white water was up to our shoulders, but, with death staring us in the face, we managed to 'angle' across the wind towards the shallows, and then poled home in our freezing clothes, thankful to have got so well out of a tight place.

It may be taken as a general rule that no puntsman should ever venture off poling ground in Scotland when the wind is in the south. The game is not worth the candle, even though the firth may for the moment be as still as glass, and a big tempting pack may be floating down with the tide. The terrific strength of these southerly squalls is due to the fact that the deep and narrow valleys through which they pass act like a funnel; the compressed air comes roaring down between the hills, and in a few seconds the placid waters are lashed into a seething sheet of foam.

But for a friendly stake which marks one of the mussel beds on the river Eden, I should not now be writing this volume. I as nearly as possible lost my life in its comparatively safe waters.

It happened in this way. In February, 1888, on hearing from my puntsman, Jack Pinkney, that there were a good lot of duck in

the Estuary I travelled down to Guard Bridge, anticipating a good day's sport with the 8-bore. The Eden lends itself perfectly to this form of shooting, the duck being in small scattered companies. Much to my chagrin, however, I found on arrival that Jack had not finished the new double punt he was building for me, so we must perforce use the somewhat rickety single punt which appears in the first photograph in Chapter V.

This flimsy old thing was unsafe to shoot from, even in the best of weather, as any carelessness in handling would almost certainly upset it. However, in those days I was young and careless, and, having often trusted myself to its tender mercies, I had been rewarded with grand sport at times.

During the night the westerly wind had changed to the south, and



CASTLE STUART BAY, MORAY FIRTH. A FAVOURITE RESORT OF WIGEON

on the following day we had a dead calm, varied by sharp squalls from over the St. Andrews links. As we were returning, after a good morning's work, and the outgoing tide had reduced the channel to the breadth of half a mile, I saw a small bunch of scaup fly in from the sea and pitch in the tideway. The water was perfectly calm, but as we lay down and ran out to the birds a heavy puff of wind caught us astern. Jack said we must turn at once, as our two inches above water would be no protection in the central stream, where there was sure to be a small cross 'jabble;' but, like an idiot, I laughed at his warning, and on we raced till within fifty yards of our birds, when I knocked down three from the bunch as they rose, killing two and winging the third. We could then probably have retreated in safety had I been content with the birds in hand. But no, I must have the cripple, which, of course, headed straight for the opposite shore. A few minutes more, and we were in the middle of the main channel and in a very nasty 'jabble,' when an exclamation from Jack caused me to turn round. That one look opened my eyes to our critical position, and I felt sure that our last hour had come. A green sea had risen astern, and every successive wave was washing over our punt on each side of Jack, who was breaking the force of the incoming waters with his back; so I put down my gun and baled away like a demon, knowing that if we could only hold on for another hundred yards we should be on poling ground again, where it would not matter what became of the boat. All of a sudden, however, the punt seemed to drag, and then stopped altogether. She was waterlogged, and I saw it was all up.

'We'll have to swim!' shouted Jack, and before the words were out of his mouth, I found myself struggling in the water. I instinctively



struck out for the shore, but being but a poor swimmer at the best of times, and now burdened with heavy clothes and sea-boots, I felt the task to be a hopeless one. Then, just one wild glance around, and I caught sight of the big stake already referred to. Two strokes, and I was there, with my arm clutched desperately round the post. Jack, meanwhile, was already half-way to the shore, and a minute later floundering, half-another hundred water, till at last earth, and, old as was like a hare up the mussel gatherers' same merciful Providence the stake in the waters, it so happened were two mussel-one of their small this Jack and the my rescue at top



GEORGE JENNINGS

For thirty-six years puntsman on the  
Dornoch Firth

I saw him half-running through yards of mud and he struck solid he was, coursed coast towards the boats. Under the vidence that put middle of the pened that there men clearing out boats, and with two men came to speed.

Meanwhile, my position was the reverse of pleasant. The cold was so intense that but for a notch on the pole, against which I managed to fix one of my sea-boots, I could not have held on for five minutes. Luckily, too, the pole was covered with tiny limpets, which, though they cut my hands, gave me a good hold for my legs. Five, and then ten, minutes went by, and I tried to turn my head to look up-stream, when, to my horror, my foot slipped and I all but lost my hold. My foot,



however, had touched mussels and slime, which gave me great hope.

At last, after what seemed ages, I heard distant shouts upstream, and with a great effort managed to screw myself round in time to see a black boat coming quickly towards me. Cramped and frozen, they dragged me in, and I was some time getting over the chill contracted during this adventure.

At low tide the mussel-men recovered the punt and guns—the latter in a fearful condition. In the punt were also the two wretched birds which had been the cause of our disaster. Poor Jack Pinkney came off worse than I did; he had previously suffered agonies from rheumatism, and the immersion in freezing water made him seriously ill for months afterwards. The following year he did little more than creep about the shore, supporting himself by shooting ducks with a 12-bore I gave him; and now, crippled with rheumatism as a result of the constant wet in which he has been obliged to live, he shares without complaint the fate that so many gallant fellows like himself have to bear.

Though in this volume I narrate other misfortunes just as they have occurred to me, I do not wish to convey the idea that in Scotland wildfowl-shooting in the gunning punt is only a pastime for foolhardy adventurers. The northern waters are probably more dangerous than those of other coasts; but, with due care, most risks can and should be avoided. Just as in big-game hunting, it is generally the rash young fellow, with more pluck than judgment, or the very old, highly experienced hunter who gets himself into trouble. The young sportsman 'chances' the danger, rather enjoying the idea of risk; whilst the old hunter gets so accustomed to





THE LUCKY SCAUP.—TAY ESTUARY.





THE LUCKY SCAUP. - TAY ESTUARY.



dangerous creatures that, one day, he overestimates his certainty of aim or his knowledge of the animal's habits, makes a slight mistake and gets caught; and so it is with the fowler. The ordinary hardships of the chase are themselves severely trying, especially in night shooting—a form of sport that an amateur would do well to let alone. George Jennings, the 'doyen' of puntsmen in northern waters, and now entirely crippled with rheumatism, after thirty years' service, told me that no young man should punt until he is twenty-five, and that he should stop at thirty. Excellent advice, and no doubt often repeated; but I wonder how many have followed it?

Out of the four professional puntsmen on the Moray, between the years 1880 and 1890, two were drowned and one was completely crippled by rheumatism. The fourth, John Robertson, of Avoch, a man who always took things very easily, retired in 1893. During the same period, on the Forth, there were four professional gunners above Blackness, possibly more; and two of these also met death by drowning, one of them being swamped just below the ramparts of Blackness Castle, where I was staying in 1887.

Most of the Scotch firths are dangerous, owing to heavy tides; but others, more or less land-locked, would be safe were it not for squalls. This too may be noted—that whilst in most other places the best sport is obtained during lulls in the most stormy weather, it is not so in northern waters, for many of the best fowling waters cannot be worked immediately after very rough weather. In Scotland I have always done best, and seen the largest quantity of birds, at the beginning of a very hard frost accompanied by perfect calm.

Ample directions relating to modern punts and gear are given



ST. ANDREWS FROM THE NORTH

in the works of Sir R. Payne Gallwey and in the 'Art of Wildfowling,' by my friend Mr. Abel Chapman—an admirable work, and of great practical use; so I shall not touch upon the subject beyond remarking that the same armament that does for England and abroad will do for Scotland.

And here let me say one word about the attitude of the amateur towards the professional gunner in Scotland. Whilst the shore shooter and even the 8-bore shooter in the punt are regarded as friends by the poorer gunner, the same cannot be said of the punt gunner. There are very few professionals, and as they make but a precarious living at the game, they naturally do not look with a kindly eye

upon the newcomer ; but they are to be won over by kind and considerate treatment. I have shot duck, in some cases year after year, in all the northern grounds, from the Firth of Forth to the Little Ferry, and I have never had any trouble after once going out of my way to make friends with my brothers-in-arms. Although I had at first some little difficulty with the numerous shore shooters on the Eden, I found that by giving them all I shot, excepting the few specimens required for my collection, they soon ceased to bother me on the occasional days I took there. After all, though tidal waters are free to the public, due consideration should always be given to those who have, as it were, local rights, and who, in some few cases, look to these for their daily bread.

Scotland is not a country where big bags or a large quantity of saleable fowl can be obtained, neither is the man wanted who goes there with the object of making a profit by his sport. His presence would certainly be resented.

The great charm about the Scottish coasts is the beauty of the scenery and the infinite variety of its feathered inhabitants. There are times, however, when a big shot may be obtainable, but this is quite the exception. The fowler has rather to be content with several shots at small batches of fowl, the broken nature of the coast often making it possible to obtain more than one shot without unduly disturbing the ground ; and thus the naturalist gunner, who wishes only for specimens and a few duck to send to friends, will find here ideal shooting waters. He will see, and grow familiar with, many of the sea ducks, waders and divers, which in England and Ireland are only known by name. The shore shooting, too, of Scotland is infinitely superior to any other within the British Isles.

## CHAPTER II

### ON DAY AND EVENING SHOOTING BY THE SEA

THERE are many days, and in the north many weeks, during every winter when the fowler must abandon his punt and seek his sport about the marshes, lakes, and shores which lie in the neighbourhood of an estuary or the sea. When the wind has for days churned the tawny waters into a seething mass of foam and flying scud it would be madness to go afloat, even if shooting with the big gun were possible. Then even the fishing-boats drag and strain at their taut cables, or lie high and dry on the pebbly beach, whilst none but the great ocean ships can safely face the sea.

But these days of idleness for the puntsman are often the best for the shore gunner and the flight shooter. In fine weather the duck—at any rate the surface-feeding species—delight to rest for the greater part of the day in the open sea; but they do not care, any more than human beings, to be tossed about and buffeted by driving waves; so after a day or two of heavy wind they seek the shelter of broken coasts or inland waters, where they may be pursued with considerable success by the coast gunner who knows their haunts and has discovered their times of flight. Now, then, is the chance for the man on the spot—the man who lives in the neighbourhood, and is in the habit of being abroad at all hours of the day and

night in pursuit of his favourite occupation. Sudden changes in the weather are of common occurrence, and sometimes so violent and so bewildering to the birds that, for a day at least, they cease to exercise their usual caution, intent only on seeking shelter from the howling tempest. Instinctively they make for some well-known haven in an inner bay, where, under the lee of a sheltering hill, they can find comparative peace; but to get there they must needs pass over strips of land and points jutting into the sea, whether gunners be about or not. In the months of January and February, after the first heavy frost has broken, the northern firths are frequently visited by terrific gales from the north-north-west, when the waters are lashed into such a state of foam and fury that after a day or two the duck become so unsettled that they will often come within range of the shore shooter waiting for them on the edge of the mud, where they can easily be killed with an 8-bore. They afford, however, the best sport of all to the 'day flight shooter,' as we may call him, should they commence to fly during the day, though this they are always most unwilling to do. Stationed on some likely spot on a headland jutting out into the bay or firth, he can, during a severe gale, completely command the duck passing over his ground. Owing to the force of the head-wind against which they have to battle, they are obliged to fly low, and consequently well within shot; moreover, the line taken by the first birds is usually followed by the succeeding flocks; so plenty of shooting may be obtained by watching the point where the first ducks pass, provided the gunner does not show himself to the advancing 'trips' of birds. Duck much shot at are almost as alert and suspicious as stags. The sounds of the shots do not so much alarm them as any sudden or



unusual movement on the part of the gunner, for should a small flock of duck that is advancing observe the enemy, they immediately inform their nearest followers, who in turn pass the word on to those behind them, whereupon the birds will take an entirely new direction, generally far enough away from the shore to spoil the shooter's chance for a considerable time.

When duck are forced to resort to one of these great day flights they will often continue the movement throughout the entire day. Happy, then, is the shore shooter who, though living at some distance inland, is kept informed as to what is going on on the coast. At mid-day he may hear that the duck have been passing all the morning, and yet may get to the coast in time for a good afternoon's sport. Such has been my good fortune on several occasions, and some of the most delightful days I have ever spent in pursuit of wildfowl have been obtained in this manner. In one particular estuary in Scotland there lived an old fisherman who was a close ally of mine. I generally spent the winter in Perth, about two hours by train from the estuary, and many a good afternoon's shooting I owed to the vigilance and *bonhomie* of the old man, who always wired me whenever a day's flight had commenced.

By far the best place for day flight shooting in Scotland, when conditions are favourable, is the Ferry Point, Tarlogie, near Tain, in Ross-shire. It is private property, over which no one can shoot without leave from the laird, so there can be no harm to anybody in disclosing its name. One has only to look at a map of Scotland to get a good idea of the class of sport to be found there. The twilight shooting is a distinctive feature of this admirable little estate. Any shooting tenant who is keen about the sport can obtain from



two to three hundred duck at flight in the season; and when a day flight occurs the number of wigeon and mallard coming from the long reaches of the Dornoch Firth and passing over this strip of land into Edderton Bay on the western side is almost incredible. During a great wind-storm in January 1885, when the waters of the firth were lashed into a sea of foam, the greatest number of duck ever seen there passed into Edderton Bay. They began moving at daybreak, and went on all day long in an almost continuous stream,



THE DORNOCH FIRTH

the estimate in the evening being that between twenty and thirty thousand wigeon had passed the Ferry Point on that day. I had these particulars from John Ross, a well-known Cromarty Firth gunner, and Mr. G. Jennings, the veteran puntsman of the north, who were both at the Point on that day, and whose estimate was, I have no doubt, pretty nearly correct. Ross began shooting at an early hour, and killed seventy duck with his 12-bore, when, for lack of cartridges, he had to give up.

Once, on Loch Leven, I had a great day like this, thanks to a

sudden gale; and one evening, on the Moray coast, a blinding snow-storm coming on somewhat before the usual hour of fighting, gave me an exceptional evening's sport. Probably the duck, looking up to windward from the sea, and noticing the growing darkness of the land, presumed that night had fallen, and so began to flight fully an hour before the usual time. I was crouching in the shadow of some mud banks, where I could distinctly see them coming up-wind out of the bright light, and they, blinded by the storm, passed just over the point where I lay concealed. The flight lasted only about ten minutes; but in that time I secured fifteen wild-duck and one wigeon—the best evening's flight work I ever had on unpreserved waters.

There are few of the main wildfowl resorts in Scotland which have not in their vicinity some lagoons, marshes, backwaters, lakes or rivers, where the shore gunner can obtain a little sport by day, or during the early morning and evening flights. Wherever the tide flows there is freedom for all; and in many out-of-the-way corners in Scotland, rarely visited by wildfowlers, there is ample room and far better sport to be obtained than on some of the third-rate grouse moors and low ground shootings, which often let for high prices.

A friend of mine was recently complaining that every authoritative book on shooting was written wholly and solely for the rich man, and that the poor man or gunner of very moderate means might seek in vain for information that would help him to find a little rough shooting for a small sum, or that was free altogether. There is much truth in this. True also it is that, whilst England is simply overcrowded with gunners of all kinds,

Scotland and Ireland are comparatively deserted. At the present moment I know of a dozen spots in the former country where most excellent fighting is to be had, and as many other places where, by walking along the shores and stalking on inland sea lochs, access to which is, of course, quite free, a good bag—as good as any keen sportsman need desire—may be obtained by one who knows something of the ways of duck and can hold his gun straight. Fort George, where I was quartered for three winters, is by no means a good spot for the shore shooter, the only two fighting places, which I discovered after much trouble, being respectively three and seven miles from the Fort, with a good road to the latter along which one can drive; yet on the evenings when punting was impossible I obtained the following results:—

|                        |     |           |     |                     |
|------------------------|-----|-----------|-----|---------------------|
| January–February, 1891 | ... | 30 visits | ... | 103 duck, 2 wigeon. |
| January–February, 1892 | ... | 27 visits | ... | 98 duck, 8 wigeon.  |

To these totals must be added 63 and 42 duck of various kinds killed during the day on an inland loch (Loch Flemington) where I had leave to go.

That the sport is arduous and attended with a certain amount of danger and hardship makes it all the more enjoyable to the genuine sportsman; and in these days, when fowl have become so acute in the detection of danger, it is only at rare intervals that the gunner can create any but the smallest diminution in their vast numbers. The fowler who lives close at hand, and means to make the best of his shooting, must keep his eye on the weather-glass, and be ready to start at a moment's notice, day or night, whenever winds or tides may favour his operations. A

temporary lull in a gale, and he is off to his punt at once; on a still evening, creeping down with the tide. During the full moon he lies, sometimes half-frozen, waiting for the fowl to gather with the flowing tide; or when the weather is too coarse to put to sea, he can whistle up his retriever, stuff his fur waistcoat in his game bag, and go fighting—a delightful sport, on which I now proceed to dilate.

Every morning and evening duck flight. Starting in the evening from their resting places on the seas or lakes, they move up against the wind, flying in small parties to some well-known feeding grounds on the mud flats, streams, ponds, etc. in the immediate vicinity; the morning flight being simply the return of the birds to their resting grounds for the day.

The gunner who lives in the neighbourhood of these feeding grounds makes it his business to find out the line which the birds take in their passage, and at twilight either waits for them at some point along that line, or stations himself by the spring at some ditch or pond where their footprints on the mud show that they are in the habit of feeding every night.

Some sort of a shelter is, of course, necessary to screen the gunner. This can be hastily devised out of any material that comes handy, where rock, stone wall, or bank is not available. If it is impossible to get any cover at all, it is well to kneel down on the game bag and make your dog sit in front of you, when, in the gloaming, one's figure may so far blend with the features of surrounding objects as to escape observation until the duck come within shot. In their evening flight duck do not take alarm nearly so quickly at any object on land as they would do during the day, provided the

object keeps perfectly still, as a gunner of any experience is sure to do.

Another maxim it is as well to observe. Always walk to your flight if it is under four miles; and, if driving to the ground, give yourself plenty of time, so that you may walk the last half-mile and arrive with a certain amount of heat in your body. If you do the same on leaving, you never feel the worse for the intense cold which prevails in the northern firths during winter.

To achieve the highest success in flight shooting, a man must be gifted with exceptionally good sight and hearing, and accustomed to take note of every little object or circumstance that may tend to



THE EVENING FLIGHT

help him in his quest. He will then learn by experience how and where to make his stand, and in course of time his perceptive powers will be quickened to a quite surprising extent. He will see



as well as hear birds passing by or overhead that, even if they caught the ear of the novice, would never be detected by his eye.

On fine moonlight nights in still weather duck generally fly high and out of shot. They do not flight early, sometimes not at all, at sundown, but keep moving to the feeding grounds at night, when it is generally impossible to see them. But, during heavy wind and snow, or frost hard enough to freeze the mud itself, the flight shooter has his chance; by concealing himself near some open water or spring he may probably get a short but exciting evening's sport.

Even the experienced shot—the man who is quite at home in other forms of the chase—will at first find great difficulty in localising the precise direction of the flight which fowl are taking in their passage past or over him. When he hears the birds approaching he is apt to make too many calculations as to their line and pace, and, in moving his head about to catch the sound, the wind coming from behind him creates such a noise in the ear which is turned towards it as to drown the more important sound that is entering the other orifice. Here, as elsewhere, first impressions are generally the best. The whistling of the approaching pinions will be heard in one line in front of the shooter; therefore, should the duck not be observed, it is best to keep the head only slightly turned towards the point from which the sound first emanated; the chances are, then, that the duck will be at once viewed when they come within the angle of sight.

For practice in quick shooting there is nothing better than fighting. Most of the chances will be smart enough to satisfy the quickest of shots, as the birds are frequently not viewed until









*Mallard Ducking.*



immediately over the head of the shooter, and it is fatal to allow them to pass behind; they must be taken within the space of a few yards, or the shot will be lost.

The best nights for sport by inland waters are during the most stormy weather, when the birds, driven from the open sea, gather in large numbers in the northern firths, and take refuge under the protecting headlands of the bays, which are practically undisturbed during the day. Then, early in the evening, they flight in pairs or small parties to the inland springs and ponds. All the northern firths, I may say, are admirably adapted for flight shooting, running east and west; and the prevailing wind throughout the winter is generally a westerly one.

Another hint or two to my brother sportsmen may not be out of place here. For a man to thoroughly enjoy fighting, he must take every precaution against catching cold while waiting for the flight to commence, or his sport may be destroyed for a season, even if his health is not permanently injured. Especially is this necessary in the northern firths, where the icy hand of winter is most severely felt. He can protect himself if he will; for, as a Russian lady said to an English friend, who asked how she managed to withstand the fearful rigour of the Siberian winter: 'Anyone can dress up to cold; the difficulty is to dress down to heat.' And now here is my recipe: Carry in your game bag a waistcoat of soft buckskin, fitting well up to the neck and reaching down to the hips; and let it be lined with mink, or any soft fur, and fixed to a broad belt with a double buckle to hold it firmly round the waist, thus doubling the warmth of the garment by protecting the most vulnerable part of the body against currents of



cold air passing up and down the back. Put the waistcoat on when you arrive at your destination ; and, before starting for home, replace it in the bag, and quicken the circulation of your blood by a good sharp run—not forgetting to gather up your birds and to work your dog for a couple of hundred yards or so behind you in the line of flight which the duck have taken after passing you. If you have had many shots there is sure to be a bird or two that has come down unobserved, and which you would undoubtedly lose did you not adopt this precaution. On reaching home be sure to give your dog a good rubbing with a coarse towel, to dry her if she is wet. A little attention of this kind will probably add a year or two to her life, although nothing seems to prevent the fowler's dog from becoming stone deaf at a comparatively early age. This is entirely owing to immersion in the salt water, which soon injures the drum of the ear.

After firing at passing birds, and whilst loading again, listen for some seconds after your shots, as one of your ducks may fall at some little distance ; but, at the same time, keep your head in such a position as to enable you to observe the approach of other birds. The very best chances in fighting are often lost by running to pick up dead or wounded birds, or birds which the shooter thinks he has wounded ; especially when this happens at the moment when the flight has just begun. It must be remembered that in all probability the first duck has risen from a big pack far out to sea, and when he first rises he is almost invariably followed by the entire flock in little parties, moving at short intervals in nearly the same line. The shooter should therefore leave everything to his dog, and not let her roam from his side unless a bird he has

knocked down threatens to be a noisy nuisance, or may reach the water.

The flight generally lasts from ten minutes to three-quarters of an hour; but by far the best nights are those in which the period of movement is the shortest. On fine nights few ducks care to risk their lives by coming in in the gloaming; they prefer to wait for the semi-darkness which a moon and a starry, clear sky give, and against which it is most difficult for the sharpest-eyed shooter to discern his game. But of this more anon—when we come to consider the requirements of the shore gunner who pursues his sport by moonlight.

Sometimes the process of 'baiting' or strewing the mud and banks where the duck are in the habit of feeding nightly, may be followed with considerable success; but this can only be worked well on certain grounds, which are regularly resorted to during hard weather. I have repeatedly tried this plan, but with very moderate success, though I never could quite tell why. Perhaps duck take a longer period than other birds, such as wood-pigeons, grouse, etc., to carry to each other the whereabouts of the delicacies they love. There is a green flat interspersed with fresh springs and burns running into the sand banks at Whiteness Sands, between Nairn and Fort George, where at times I have had fair success by baiting, the first occasion being when I was accompanied by a friend who was most anxious to see some flight shooting. He was a good shot, and, to make sure of showing him some sport, I carefully 'fed' a spot on this bank to which I knew duck resorted at certain tides. Placing him in one of the holes I had dug for the purpose, I myself occupied another, some sixty yards seawards to his left, so that I could see the birds approaching him, and give him timely warning

before they came within his view. That evening every circumstance was favourable; the birds came splendidly in a ten-minutes flight, and several even settled within fifteen yards of him; but, unfortunately, he could not see them at all. He fired four times, but without effect, when, no doubt, had he been able to see the duck, he would have got eight or ten brace.

When laying down your feed, in the shape of barley, oats, or potato-peelings, always select a bank on the sand or mud where footprints show that duck are constantly in the habit of resting. And should the fighting ground be at no great distance from a house or farm, it is as well to enlist the services of a man to feed the place for two or three nights before you intend to shoot—setting the food out when the nights are still and fine.

During a hard frost, natural feeding ground, such as the entrance of a particular burn falling into a lake, sea, or river, will often be among the best of spots in which to practise fighting, particularly if any scraps of vegetable matter are being carried down and accumulated at its exit. Such an one occurs at a small burn flowing from the Starch Works, at Murthly, in Perthshire. Immense quantities of potatoes are used in the manufacture of this compound, and whilst the mill is in progress quantities of half-used potatoes and peelings are floated down to the River Tay, which it enters at a nice 'ducky' backwater, about a mile below Caputh Bridge. During hard frost the mouth of this burn is visited by numbers of duck, which work up from all the lakes and backwaters in Delvin, Meiklour, and Ballathie, and at flight time a good bag may be obtained any evening under favourable circumstances. James Keay, the head keeper at Murthly, has killed as many as twelve couple in

as many minutes, losing a considerable number that floated down the river, his dog being unable to get the birds out fast enough.



THE LAST DUCK

There are hardly any parts of the East Coast of Scotland or of the Islands of Orkney and the Hebrides, where fair fighting may not be obtained during the winter months, notably in the months of November, December, and January. After January the birds either do not flight so much, or, if they do, they journey to the feeding-grounds at a much later hour. In proof of this, I have always noticed that February is far the best month for successful moonlight shooting.

The keenest flight shooter I ever knew was one Charles McInnes, a butcher residing at Errol, in the Carse of Gowrie. Every possible night, for nearly twenty years, he has gone to the



Errol marshes with his gun and little water-spaniel, and, being intimately acquainted with the ground and the habits of the wild-fowl, he seldom returned without success.

One October evening he was as usual at his post, near a spot called the Reedcutter's Landing, when in the twilight he observed a bird flying towards him. By the uncertain light, and judging from the length of what he supposed to be its tail, he had no doubt that the bird in question was a pheasant; but on going to pick it up after a successful shot he was astonished and delighted to find that it was a species entirely unknown to him. This bird he took to Perth, where it was identified by the Perthshire Natural History Society as a specimen of the Purple Gallinule, and, as an announcement of the fact appeared in the local paper, I went to see the bird and have a talk with McInnes on wildfowling generally, and this strange bird in particular. On examining the bird, however, I felt certain that it was not the Purple Gallinule, and on its coming into my possession a year later I compared it with examples in the Natural History Museum, and found it to be the green-backed *Porphyrio*. This was the first of this species that was ever killed in Scotland; but another specimen was shot the same winter (1885) in Norfolk.

The chief feature in bird life appertaining to the Errol portion of the Tay Valley is the great number of wild-geese that, during the winter, frequent the barley stubbles of the Carse of Gowrie. Every year, about October 5, large numbers of Graylags, together with a few Pinkfooted and Bean Geese, arrive, and after spending their days in the great tideway between Mugdrum Island and Newburgh, adjourn to the open fields in the neighbourhood of Errol, where they feed at daybreak and sunset. Many devices are tried for their



destruction; but the geese depart every spring, almost as strong in number as when they arrived. Mr. Malloch, the well-known salmon fisher, has killed nine in a day, and once, in a fog, thirteen fell to McInnes' gun. Of his experience in this way McInnes had some good stories to tell, one of which I venture to repeat.

One autumn, about ten years ago, when the wild-geese arrived as usual, there came with them a Graylag as white as snow—so rare a bird that McInnes made up his mind he would have it, even if he had to devote the whole season to its capture. Many were the days he spent in this difficult task, again and again letting slip opportunities for killing others when he thought there was the slightest chance of his bagging the 'Goose Queen,' as he affectionately called her. The whole winter passed away, and he had but one long shot at the bird, and that without success. The following season the goose arrived again with the others, and again he devoted his attention to her. At last, as March came and went, he gave up all hope of obtaining this ornithological treasure. Still, however, for the third and even a fourth season, the bird returned and repeated her daily journeying with the others from the tideway to the fields, until, one January evening, as McInnes was walking along the high bank of the river, and about to descend to the marshes to flight, he heard the cry of the geese coming from their feeding grounds. Thinking they might possibly pass over a point here where the trees were not very high, and where the geese generally lowered their flight on approaching the mud flats, he ran with all his might to the pass, and, arriving just in time to intercept the birds, he noticed the object of his desire at the end of the flock. 'Bang, bang,' went

his two barrels, and the white goose staggered in the air, left the rest, and dropped almost to the mud below ; but, just recovering, 'herpled' along over the ooze till it reached the water some three or four hundred yards away. Needless to say, the excited sportsman made all possible haste to recover the treasure that he now looked upon as his own. He dashed out over the mud as fast as the slime and ooze would allow him, but only to find, to his infinite disgust, that between him and the water lay an impassable ditch, into which, with every forward plunge, he sank deeper and deeper. At last the mud reached his armpits, and not a step further dare he go.

Here was a tantalising situation. The object of many a weary tramp and many a lonely watch was slowly floating out with the tide, within ten yards of him, and he himself stuck so fast in the mud that only with great difficulty could he make his way back again. At last, with tears in his eyes, as he followed the slowly retreating prize, he bethought himself of one more chance, in the shape of a stone dyke running far out into the river, about half a mile further down, and to this he made his way with all speed ; but only to see the bird moving still further out under the influence of the ebb tide. Now McInnes was no swimmer, that is to say, he could not be certain of travelling a hundred yards in the water ; yet, so tantalising was the situation, for the bird was but twenty yards away, that, almost without thinking what he was about, he threw down his gun, cast all his clothes upon the stone dyke, and plunged into the stream. Almost had he reached his prize when he found himself floundering about on a mud bank, over which he could not swim, and in trying to stand he sank in up to his armpits, and was held there as fast as a cork in a glue-pot. Still he thought only of

that wretched goose, until it finally passed away before his eyes, and, drifting out into the river, was lost for ever.

The intense cold now recalled him to his senses, and realising the danger of his situation, he fought hard to escape; but his struggles only served to exhaust him. Night was coming on, and his only ray of hope now rested in the fact that the tide was ebbing instead of flowing. For three hours the unfortunate man writhed and struggled, in terror lest he should be drowned in the returning tide.

At last, in the semi-darkness, he managed to kick his way into the midst of a long reed bed, which, although well known to him, took another hour or two to negotiate, cramped and frozen as he was. He got out, however, thanks to the rare strength with which he was endowed, and, naked and half dead, eventually reached the nearest farmhouse, two miles away.

This adventure made a deep impression on McInnes for years afterwards. The memory of that awful night so haunted him that for several months he could not bear the sight of either the river or the reed beds; but gradually he came back to his old pursuits and his old ways, though he never afterwards went out without the company of a small water-spaniel which he had purchased, to save himself any future risk.

As I have said before, there is good flighting to be obtained on the estuaries and mud flats of all the Highland firths; but I shall not mention by name any that are not already well known—first, out of consideration for puntsmen or gunners in the north whose pleasure or profit I should be sorry to interfere with; and, secondly, because a man always gets more fun out of a place

that he has discovered for himself. As the result of his own enterprise he is there (*j'y suis, j'y reste*), and looks upon any new-comer as an intruder on his domain. As to the following, however, I need have no compunction on this score, for they are all well-known resorts of the wildfowler.

Castle Stuart Bay (described elsewhere in this volume) runs far inland, and when the tide recedes it leaves behind numerous great hollows or ditches into which a fresh-water stream coming from the neighbouring pastures and hills hastens to pour itself. On stormy nights these ditches are the resort of great numbers of mallard, a few teal, and widgeon, where the fresh water begins to come in. To reach the ditches duck coming up the Moray have to rise in their flight to an altitude of some three hundred feet to enable them to top the hill on which the romantic old Castle Stuart stands, as the windings of the bay form a semicircle after leaving the sea, and the destination which the birds always make for, lies parallel with the firth itself.

Here the best nights are always during very severe frosts—not, as in most fighting grounds, during half a gale of wind. Even in fairly calm frosty evenings, when the duck have not been much shot, I have seen them coming capitally to this ground, and nowhere could prettier shooting be found. The ducks seem to drop like bullets out of the clouds, immediately above one's head. At first this kind of shot will be found most difficult and perplexing to the novice, as the duck, descending at a terrific speed, do not fairly put on the brake until within some ten or fifteen yards above the mud. Were it not that they create a loud noise in their descent, and that most of them come early enough to be easily seen as they top









TEAL AND PEREGRINE.



the hill, the shooting would be almost impossible. The gunner stands facing the hill to the north or north-east, no matter in what direction the wind is blowing, and if he has sharp ears he will presently hear the mallard drake and his duck talking to each other before they appear over the crest of the hill. Two little black specks can then be seen, and the next moment there is a hum in the air as the birds descend from the clouds, and the shooter must get off his two barrels at top speed if he would have something to show for his evening's sport. After some experience, while quartered at Fort George, I found that the best way was to kneel on my bag until the duck were well down in their drop, and then spring quickly to my feet and fire the moment they were within shot. If the birds were passing behind me, their attention seemed so fixed on their forward course that they took little notice of this manœuvre, so one had to snap at them as they passed over; but if, on the other hand, they were making for the ditches in front, they would catch sight of me and instantly do their utmost to check their downward course. At such a moment the strain on the bones and muscles of their wings must be terrific. I have often wondered that those members did not break.

To give the reader some idea of the speed of this downward fall: when mallard in good condition—as they generally are in December and January—are shot, even whilst flying overhead, and fall on a hard substance, such as a sheet of ice, they are nearly always burst by the sudden impact. I have seen this again and again when shooting at these ditches, the fall not only opening the body from crop to vent, but smashing the breast-bone to pieces. I have also frequently seen a duck, when thus shot on its downward

course, disappear in soft mud, buried so deep in the ooze as to leave hardly a trace of its existence.

In almost exact contrast to the fighting to be seen in Castle Stuart is that of the little inlet on the Dornoch Firth in Sutherlandshire, known as Skibo Bay. During the south-south-westerly gales, or a westerly snowstorm, this little bay is, for its size, one of the best in Scotland for mallard. For weeks during the season it will be all but deserted, and then a sudden change in the weather moves a great bulk of the mallard in the Dornoch Firth and the adjacent lakes into this retreat and the Little Ferry. When birds are moving in the evening into this bay they cover such an area of land in the course of their flight that it is hardly worth the while of a single shooter to try to intercept them at any given point, though, more than once, when they were coming in very early—in fact almost a day flight—I have got a few shots by running in to a point within the line of their flight. But the best course, I found, was to take my punt up the channel on the in-flowing tide, and await the coming of the birds on the mud banks themselves.

Most unfortunately, they generally come very late to this ground, and are very difficult to see even by the most practised eye; for the moment they catch sight of the glistening waters of the bay, they take their header, and come scudding along over the mud at a great speed towards the gunner, who must take quick snap shots at them, as they flash by within a yard or so of the ground. A driven grouse coming low and straight towards the shooter is not a very difficult shot; but try it in semi-darkness on duck, with but a second or two in which to raise your gun and fire, and the percentage killed will not be remarkable for their number.



The places in Scotland where morning flighting can be practised with success are few and far between, owing to the fact already noticed, that duck travel in large bodies back to their resting grounds at daybreak, and do not then confine themselves to such regular lines as they are in the habit of following at sunset. The former consideration, therefore, more or less puts coast shooting almost out of the question, except in inland sea-lochs or fresh water connected with the sea by narrows, burns, or channels, down which the duck regularly pass at both flights.

Most sportsmen will have noticed that duck when travelling prefer flying over water; even when passing from one sheet of water to another they will avoid the land if they can. This may be said to be a hard and fast rule with all the true diving ducks, but not with the surface feeders, such as mallard, widgeon, and teal; for when they in their flight observe the waters for which they are heading, they are as likely as not to cut over large extents of land to reach their desired haven, especially if they have been much shot at at any given point on their usual water route. It is therefore difficult for the gunner to find any fixed station for the morning flight where he can be sure that mallard and widgeon pass regularly. The best spot will be a point on the bank of a stream separating two large extents of water, where the duck come from the lower water to the upper during the night, and return by the same route on the following morning, not necessarily making any short cuts to reach the upper lochs, marshes, or springs whence the stream comes.

Morning flighting has two material advantages over the shooting to be enjoyed at twilight—the one being that birds are seldom if

ever lost, and the other that good luck often comes to the sportsman's aid in the shape of a rapid change from night to morning, which leaves the duck in their feeding ground longer than they otherwise would have been. On very dark and stormy mornings the day seems to come without any warning—a slight break appears in the surrounding darkness and the light grows with extreme rapidity, the morning being ushered in almost before either duck or shooter is aware of its presence. Now is the sportsman's chance, if the wind is only strong enough to keep the duck from mounting too high in the air, and the birds, only slightly alarmed at finding themselves belated, are kind enough to travel in pairs or family parties, instead of in big flocks. In a few minutes he will probably make his gun hot, as his shots will be both easy and frequent; and he will trudge home that morning with a full bag and an empty stomach, needing only the hot breakfast that awaits him to make his happiness complete.

### CHAPTER III

#### ON MOONLIGHT SHOOTING—THE FOWLER'S DOG, AND WANDERINGS BY THE SEA

ON fine moonlight nights, when flight shooting is impracticable, a little sport may sometimes be obtained along the shore; but, except on those rare occasions when every other circumstance is eminently favourable, the amateur had better leave night shooting alone. His chance of success is too small to compensate for his discomfort and the serious risk of his health. Let him rather act on the advice of the oldest puntsman in Scotland—himself once a very strong man, but now much crippled, as all old puntsmen are, with rheumatism—‘Never shoot at night unless you are obliged to.’ It is sad to reflect that nearly all the professional puntsmen in England, Ireland, and Scotland do their work at night, and most of the poor fellows have to pay for it too, sooner or later. One rarely sees a puntsman, over the age of forty, who does not suffer from the results of his nocturnal expeditions.

However, an occasional night's shoulder gun shooting will not hurt any man, provided he take sufficient care of himself. But to make it worth his while to go out, there must be a strong breeze on, and a great number of small clouds constantly passing across the face of the moon; their edges will then be brightly lighted up, and against them the duck will be plainly outlined; whereas, with

only the starry firmament as a background, they could hardly be seen at all. The accompanying sketch may serve to show the sort of night I mean.

Though not particularly keen on wildfowling, the Highlanders in the vicinity of the northern firths—hardy men as they are, with constitutions of iron and cold-proof skins—will often pass the greater part of a winter night waiting for duck coming into the mud flats. Munlochy Bay on the north shore of the Moray Firth was formerly one of the best duck resorts in Scotland; but the birds have now been almost entirely driven out by the local night shooters.

Tain Bay in the Dornoch Firth is still in high favour with the midnight shooters, and this wild part of Sutherland is at any time well worth a visit; but if any of my readers think of going there for coast shooting alone, it may damp their ardour to hear that in the town of Tain alone there are more gun licenses taken out than in the whole of the villages of the County of Caithness put together.

Inverness Bay is also a favourite haunt of the night shooters; and being close to the town of Inverness, is much shot by the townsmen when the westerly gales are on. Worthy of notice, too, are the long strips of land that form the dividing line between the Moray and the Beauly Firths, where immense numbers of duck pass nightly from the former up to the feeding grounds of the latter.

Shooting on the Moray Firth one day, I met an old gunner who, like myself, was strolling on the shore near Culloden, after golden plovers. Under the genial participation of a 'nip' he told me some wonderful tales of days gone by, when ducks were as

plentiful as sparrows and as easy to get. On my asking him if many duck were obtained at night on the 'Longmon' ranges (the flats near Inverness) his reply was both amusing and characteristic. 'Weel,' he said, 'if it's ta twilight shootin' ye mean, ye'll whiles hear



SHOOTING BY MOONLIGHT, SHOWING HOW DUCK APPEAR WHEN BACKED  
BY SHADOW OR BRIGHT CLOUDS

a bit shottie, but when the mune gets up, she'll be like ta Battle o' Waterloo a' nicht.'

In the months of August and September good moonlight shooting may sometimes be obtained by the sportsman living up country. If there is in his shooting or its immediate vicinity any large sheet of water where duck are in the habit of resting during the day, he may make up his mind for certain that during the night these same birds are feeding in the corn or potato fields in the neighbourhood of the lakes. These spots can easily be found, and,



as a rule, the farmers readily grant permission to enter the standing grain, for the duck do a pretty considerable amount of mischief once they have started to make any particular field their night resort. Having obtained this permission, the sportsman must proceed to examine the fields carefully. The mallard (for they are his quarry) generally select some spot where the grain has been laid by rain, or if there be no such place the birds soon make one for themselves—generally in the very centre of the field—and being at this period in full moult, the gunner will have no difficulty in finding them, as their droppings and feathers will be seen everywhere. The flight shooting is generally good then, but more can be killed when the moon is up, and the dark forms of the duck, as they are about to alight on the yellow corn, are easily distinguishable. They are then unceremoniously potted on the ground—a proceeding not much relished by the sportsman, but highly approved by the farmer, who does not care two straws as to how he gets them so long as they are in his bag.

A friend of mine, who has done much of this class of shooting, informs me that if the duck are allowed time, and not disturbed till the night is well on, they scatter about the field, and good sport may be sometimes obtained by a couple of guns, walking them up in line towards the light. The duck then rise singly at intervals, and afford good and quick shooting. The gunner must be on the alert the moment he hears the duck beating the surrounding grain with its wings, or rising, and must be 'on' his bird as soon as it tops the corn; otherwise its form, obscured by the dark background, is quickly lost to view.

My readers may think, as I do, that this form of sport is

objectionable, as taking a somewhat mean advantage of birds which would probably afford a more legitimate chase in the lakes and marshes near by; but when these retreats do not happen to be on your own ground, and the duck are playing havoc with your corn, as well as the farmer's, the argument of the pocket may, perhaps, pardonably prevail against the instincts of the sportsman. The few occasions on which I have waited and watched in the corn fields have generally been attended with failure; but one autumn evening, in North Uist, I slew twelve mallards in half an hour, shooting them as they came in.

Certainly the most important aid to the success of the flight shooter is the possession of a clever and well-trained dog. To him



MALLARD FEEDING IN THE SHALLOWS AND ON THE MUD

an intelligent and well-broken retriever or water-spaniel is as necessary as the collie is to the shepherd, or the terrier to the rat-catcher. And here I would draw attention to the difference between an intelligent and a well-broken dog. Like ourselves, some

dogs are gifted with unusual intellect, and give but little trouble in their education ; while others, however well-bred and good-looking they may be, are so stupid that even the most careful and painstaking of dog-breakers could never make anything of them. They are therefore utterly useless to the fowler. Better the veriest cur that ever stepped, provided he shows a few grains of common sense.

In selecting a pup for wildfowling work the shooter cannot be too careful in his inquiries as to the cleverness, mouth, taste for the water, and other characteristics of the mother. Where possible, he should ascertain this for himself, as the mental capacity and proclivities of the mother are generally transmitted to the pups. I think I am correct in saying that a dog gets from her most of his abilities—good, bad, or indifferent ; while his external form is due rather to his father. Good bench qualities will, of course, add to his value, as affording more pleasure to the eye, but otherwise they are of no importance.

All the best dogs that I have seen working have been bitches—crosses between the curly and the waving retrievers. As a general rule a curly coat denotes strength, intelligence, and a relish for the hard and coarse work of the water ; whilst the wavy-coated dogs are more amenable to discipline, and gifted with a softness of mouth and sweetness of disposition not to be found in any other of the canine species. For pluck and endurance an Irish water-spaniel is a good second ; but, unfortunately, his life is short, and his jaws are long, and after a few years of hard work he forgets that there is a difference of grip to be observed in the picking up of a mallard and a snipe.

For the wildfowler's purpose a bitch is far preferable to a dog, as the former always takes the water and stands the severe work among rocks and ice far better than the latter; and not being liable to be cut in the same way as a dog she is also much pluckier.

Now, having obtained your pup, you must break her yourself to ensure a perfect animal, for a retriever loses something on every change of masters, and your effort should be to get the best out of your companion as her character develops—a work well worth the years of trouble and patience necessary to its accomplishment. Where you conveniently can, let your dog live with you in the house, or if not, in some warm, dry outhouse. Her health demands as much care as your own; and, in time, when she has got to know your ways, she will be able to do almost anything but speak, and will understand the sport as well as yourself.

In my early days of shore shooting I was fortunate enough to procure a dog which eventually turned out to be (so far as my experience goes) the very best that ever stood on four legs. 'Jet,' for that was her name, was but a pup of ten months—a smooth-coated retriever of a most gentle and affectionate disposition, and quite unbroken—when I bought her of an innkeeper in Perth. She was the keenest and best nosed dog I have ever seen—too keen, as I found at first, and constantly running-in; but eventually she settled down and became almost human in her intelligence.

Every man becomes sentimental about something, and if I say too much here about dear old 'Jet,' who was my constant companion for sixteen years, the reader must forgive me. Many are the tales I could tell of her prowess; but I will confine myself to a few instances of her indomitable perseverance and pluck as a swimmer.

One trick I may mention as interesting, for she acquired it by her own cunning. Every shooter knows that while directing his eyes to the front or flank, as he naturally does while walking along the coast, birds often come up from behind, and, before he can observe them, sheer off out of shot. 'Jet,' however, was quite up to this. As she trotted along behind me she constantly glanced back over her shoulder, and if she saw anything coming she would at once run in front of me, gazing alternately at myself and the fowl in an inquiring manner, thereby often giving the chance of obtaining something desirable. There was no sea, however thunderous—not even the great winter breakers of the North Atlantic—that she would not face, if I asked her to fetch some fallen treasure.

When seas were unusually heavy she betrayed a most remarkable instinct in preserving herself from being dashed on the rocks. Instead of plunging into the mass of water, as a breaker surged towards her, she would allow herself to be carried out on the wash of the receding rush in time to meet the next huge wave and top it just as it was about to fall with a force that would have knocked her senseless had it broken upon her. More than once in a heavy sea she was not quite quick enough in this exploit, and paid pretty smartly for her daring. An instance of this occurred one day in the winter, when I was lying among some rocks near the Black Craig, Orkney Isles, during one of those big westerly gales when Arctic Gulls and Eiders come along the shore. I had been watching for them for some days previously, and whilst the gale was at its height a male eider came by, at which I fired. The bird was hard hit, and made out to sea, but had not gone fifty yards when it fell dead amongst the breakers. As the sea was wild in the extreme,





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*The first shot of the season on Muddy Moss.*



and I knew that the bird would be soon blown ashore, I never thought of sending my dog in after it; but 'Jet,' who was pottering about in the rocks at a short distance, unfortunately had her eye also on the eider, and, seeing it fall, at once made for it, in spite of my efforts to stop her, all my shouting being drowned by the roar of the ocean. I could only stand and admire her pluck as she fought through the first two breakers. Now those who have lived much by the sea have noticed that these heavy breakers always travel over the face of the ocean in threes. The third did for 'Jet,' as she was trying to raise herself and look about for the bird. It broke completely over her, and I felt a chill go to my heart as, the next moment, I saw her body floating helplessly about amidst the rush of seething waters. Two more waves came and brought her nearer the shore, so I put down my gun, and, running waist deep into the water, I caught her by the tail and hauled her out before another wave came. For some minutes she lay perfectly motionless, save for a twitching at her nostrils, and I began to think there was no hope for her; gradually, however, she began to recover, but being quite unable to walk I had to leave my gun upon the rocks and carry her home the whole way, a distance of two and a half miles. A sorry spectacle we presented when we arrived—'Jet' half dead, and I nearly frozen.

In the terrific storm of January 1885, when seven feet of snow in Thurso kept me there for some days, I was so fortunate as to shoot one of the only three adult Ivory<sup>1</sup> gulls which have been killed in these islands. The bird fell dead amongst heavy breakers, and

<sup>1</sup> The same day I secured three Glaucous and two Iceland gulls, a great day's collecting. Snipe and redshanks were sitting about on the shore so tame that I could almost touch them.



'Jet,' without making her usual calculations, rushed in and received the incoming wave on her head. At first I thought she was killed outright, so, throwing down my gun, I ran into the surf and managed to pull her out more dead than alive; but she soon came round, and was quite herself again the next day.

One other occasion I may mention as illustrative of her prowess and swimming power. At the end of August 1885 accompanied by my old friend, Mr. George Jeffery, the well-known International football player, I was wandering along the sea coast near Tayport in the Tay estuary. Just as we passed the Lucky Scaup a bunch of Brent geese (most unusual visitors at this season) came flying out to sea, and by a long shot I was lucky enough to tip and break the pinion of one of the party. The wounded bird falling seawards just reached the water as 'Jet' entered it in hot pursuit. Flapping along the surface the goose managed to keep just out of reach of the dog, who swam with all her



'JET' AND JAMES KEAY, THE  
MURTHLY KEEPER

might some ten yards behind. About one hundred yards from shore both pursuer and pursued entered the tidal race, which here rushes out to sea at a rate of about seven miles an hour in spring tides. 'Jet' was now beyond hearing distance, and being so close to her quarry would not look round for any signal from me, so we could do nothing but run along in pursuit parallel with the coast.

In this manner we ran about three miles. The dog and bird

soon became tiny spots far out to sea, and I began to lose all hope of ever seeing my dear doggie again. However, by the merest chance, there happened that afternoon to be an old fellow collecting bait in a spot where never before or since have I seen a man so employed. We at once asked his help, but in vain. 'Na, na,' he said, 'A ken fine yon spring tide; a few meenutes to get there and a' day to get back.' Bribery and persuasion having alike failed, I told the old chap that as I had no intention of seeing my dog drowned I should take his boat whether he liked it or not. That he did not like it was clear from his reply; but a glance at my beaming friend convinced him that resistance would be useless, so he sullenly assisted us to launch his coble.

It took about ten minutes to run out to 'Jet' and her quarry, and when the latter was promptly dispatched the staunch dog fetched it to the boat, obviously proud of her accomplishment. Poor old girl, she little knew how near death she had been! Without the help that only by good luck we were able to render, she would have gone on another mile or two; then, feeling tired, would have tried in vain to make headway back to the shore. It took us about four and a half hours to make the coast again in that angry sea.

At all sorts of shooting, whether grouse driving, covert shooting, or wildfowling, 'Jet' was equally reliable; and having constant practice throughout the shooting season, she became as good a retriever as the most exacting sportsman could desire. At flight shooting she was simply perfection, and seemed, like her master, to take special delight in sitting at twilight waiting for the black forms and whistling pinions of the approaching duck. On 'coarse'

nights, when duck flying by are seen almost as soon as they are heard, a dog is seldom quicker than a man in catching sight of them ; but on still, fine nights, when the moon rises early, and the birds can be heard approaching from a distance, a good dog will always see them before the shooter, and will indicate by his motions the precise direction from which they are coming. 'Jet' was very good at this, almost invariably rising from her sitting posture, stiffening herself in pointer fashion, and whining if she thought I was not paying sufficient attention to her suggestions. Frequently, too, in an evening, when the wind is not too strong, many trips of birds will come down wind from behind the shooter, and on these occasions 'Jet's' sharp ears have often helped me to a shot that I should otherwise have lost from lack of time to change my position.

And now good-bye, old 'Jet,' fondest and faithfulest of companions ! Stone deaf, and stiff with rheumatism, she quietly lay down and died in 1891, and I can hardly hope to ever see her like again.

A few words on shore shooting, from the Naturalist's point of view, may be welcomed by readers of like passions with myself. When I first began wildfowling along the coasts of Scotland I was but a small boy of eleven, with an insatiable craze for natural history. I must find out for myself the haunts and habits of every wild animal in the country, beginning with sea-fowl ; must shoot and collect specimens, and must dissect them in order to learn their anatomy. And, as a starting point, I took the south-east corner of Scotland and worked steadily northwards along the coast. To this end all my pocket-money was scrupulously saved up ; and for years afterwards, whenever my holidays came





THE BRENT AND THEIR SATELLITES.



round, off I went, and went only with my gun and a few clothes stowed away in a bag. In this manner I obtained, by the time I was sixteen, a tolerable acquaintance of the East Coast of Scotland, having three times visited the whole distance from Dunbar in the south to Thurso in the north, omitting only the high hills of Forfarshire, Inverness, and the Black Isle, and leaving out the grouse moors of the coast between Helmsdale and Wick, and Wick and John o' Groats. By sending on a horse, I managed to cover, on average, to twenty miles a day, and in a night I never went to bed at all preferring to sit up and skinning birds, and to go to the sand-hills and sleep till the sun rose.

Ah! those early wanderings by the sea. Can you ever forget them? Those wonderful hours when Nature trembled in her birth throes to the new-born day and all the earth is glowing with the dawn of life. 'Time goes by as the shadow o'er the grass'—and yet, in those years does one scent the briny odour of the sea, and remember those days of perfect freedom, when all senses were so keen that what was swallowed up in the joy of the passing moment, and which is never dull and never lonely. To him who has been thus, the world through all her works, and with heart and hand, and eye, and ear, finds companionship in her with full satisfaction. New phases of existence and other interests are constantly coming under his notice, and what he has gained becomes a part of himself, and will be so both now and in years to come.

Though I was often, for a time, very lonely, and though I cannot ever forget those experiences,



THE SUN AND THE SATELLITES.

round, off I went, equipped only with my gun and a few clothes stowed away in a bag. In this manner I obtained, by the time I was sixteen, a thorough knowledge of the East Coast of Scotland, having three times walked the whole distance from Dunbar in the south to Thurso in the north, omitting only the high cliffs of Forfarshire, Banffshire, and the Black Isle, and again the cliff grouse moors of Sutherland, between Helmsdale and Wick, and Wick and John o' Groat's. By sending on my bag ahead I managed to cover some fifteen to twenty miles a day, and many a night I never went to bed at all, preferring to spend the time in skinning birds, and to be off to the sand-hills on the shores before the sun rose.

Ah! those early mornings by the sea. Can one ever forget them? Those wonderful hours when Nature tremulously unfolds her charms to the new-born day, and all the earth is gladdened at the sight. 'Time goes by as the shadows o'er the grass;' but never in after years does one scent the briny odour of the ocean without recalling those days of perfect freedom, when all sense of hardship or solitude was swallowed up in the joy of the passing hour. The Naturalist is never dull and never lonely. To him 'all Nature cries aloud through all her works,' and with heart responsive to his call, he finds companionship in her with full satisfaction of all his desires. New phases of existence and other interesting facts unknown before are constantly coming under his notice, and the knowledge thus gained becomes a part of himself, adding to the pleasure of his life both now and in years to come.

Though I was often, for weeks together, alone by the sea-shore, I cannot ever remember experiencing a moment's dullness, so absorbed

was I in the interest of my collection, and in the constant work it entailed. After the day's tramp was over I had to spend the evening in preparing my treasures—always a laborious task—for as all my spare cash went in railway journeys, cartridges, and hotel bills, I must do my skinning and preserving myself.

More than once I have been so weary and footsore with these long tramps that I have searched out some sheltered depression in the sand dunes, and slept soundly all night, with 'Jet' by my side. Morning then meant an aching void and cramped legs, that compelled me to seek the hospitality of some cottage or farmhouse, where I nearly always received a kind welcome from the 'guid wife.' In this way I got to know all the places along the coasts where 'wa-wa,' the wild-goose, made his home; where 'shingebis,' the diver, screamed in the wintry sea, and in what estuaries I should find the waders and the duck. With widening experience, however, these tremendous tramps were somewhat curtailed. Making friends with the local fishermen and gunners, who often expressed their surprise at finding such a little chap alone on his travels, I found out where and when the best sport was to be had, and arranged my visits accordingly.

In after years some of these good fellows became correspondents as well as friends. On certain shores which I know well, the coasts between St. Andrews and Arbroath, for instance, I think I knew every fisherman, and they knew me as 'Johnnie with the long gun,' for, even at fourteen, I was but of small stature, and used to 'tote' about a heavy 8-bore longer than myself—a special favourite from its far-reaching qualities, and unequalled as a producer of 'gun' headaches.

To the young shooter there is absolutely no training in the world to compare with shore shooting, for two reasons. There the gunner has the great advantage of having the result of every shot that he fires instantly telegraphed back to him by the water; he can see at once the exactness or error of his judgment, and by constant watching and taking shots at objects both stationary and in movement, he learns to judge correctly both distance and pace—the two most important factors in all shooting. In nearly every book on shooting are directions as to how to estimate the pace of partridges, pheasants, etc., and how to compass their destruction; but nowhere do I find young readers recommended to go to the sea-shore and teach themselves—the best of all possible means of learning. On the sea-shore the gunner soon becomes accustomed to taking readily every kind of shot at every angle, and success there ought to make him a very good performer in covert or field, for none of the game birds proper dodge, dive, and undulate like the waders by the sea. Another capital form of training is shooting under canvas, but of that more anon.



## CHAPTER IV

### ON MARSH AND LAKE SHOOTING—WITH CERTAIN OBSERVATIONS ON THE HABITS OF WILD-GEESE

THERE is a somewhat common idea that the shooting of wild-ducks in August is nothing but a massacre of the innocents—a ‘slaughter of water-rats,’ as Hawker puts it; but this is true only so far as the shooter likes to make it so. No genuine sportsman cares to add to his bag by taking advantage of the ducks when they are unable to fly, and least of all when he can have the best of sport with these same birds a few weeks later. There are, however, at this season, plenty of mallard, both young and old, with full powers of flight, and as capable of taking care of themselves in August as at any time later on; and their pursuit, whether in walking up or in driving, is always delightful. Moreover, all these home-bred birds leave their summer nesting grounds by the middle of September, and unless some of them are accounted for before this date, they would only pass on and be shot elsewhere.

Bog shooting in August and September is pleasant, but often arduous work, as one finds out when ploughing through reeds and slime on a hot day, with now and then a slip up to the waist in the treacherous ground. Here the shooter must always be in a high state of tension—ready, at a moment’s notice, to snap the duck or snipe that may rise only just within shot. To always drop

your birds dead, to mark the spot where they fall, to keep your dog well in hand, and, above all, to keep moving immediately after your shot, are all essentials to this form of the chase; and these accomplishments are not learnt in a day. It is surprising how very few sportsmen, old hands, understand how important it is to keep moving immediately after shots have been fired and birds killed or winged. If (as generally happens) only one or two birds are down, the line should never stop. Much better 'drop' a man to look for any birds that the dogs fail to pick up in their onward course; for any stoppage (especially in marsh shooting, when birds have pitched in the last remaining piece of cover) means that many, if not all, of the now crouching duck in front will rise, and, of course, out of shot; whereas, if one continues to advance slowly, they will wait, and perhaps give a succession of good chances. Highland marsh shooting is not the sport for the many, but for the few. It is delightful to enjoy it in company with some friend who understands its charms. Two guns are really quite enough to shoot any Scotch marsh that I know of, and three are almost a crowd. If there are more than this number there may be considerable shooting, but inferior sport; and at the end of the day the bag not so full as it otherwise would be; for, unlike partridges and pheasants, duck will not stand hustling on all sides. If two pursue them, and go the right way about it, they can find work enough all day long; but if the birds are surrounded, or the line is too long, they will not suffer it.

In her inland counties and adjacent islands Scotland can show some few admirable bogs and boggy lakes which attract large numbers of surface-feeding duck at different seasons, so I shall say

just a few words about the principal ones with which I am personally well acquainted. The best of these are Loch Leven, Loch Spynie, Murthly Moss, the bogs of North and South Uist, Benbecula, Tiree, and certain small marshes in Perthshire, Caithness, Wigtown, and the Orkney and Shetland Islands.

The three first-named are certainly the best of all, and being in private hands are carefully preserved and shot. Loch Leven, indeed, is a perfect paradise for duck and geese, for little shooting is now allowed there, and the local fishing association are so jealous of their rights that they do all in their power to spoil the sport of any gunner who comes their way, even if armed with the authority of Sir Graham Montgomery, the owner of the loch. I have had rare sport there, for all that, thanks to Sir Graham, who for a long period most generously gave me leave to go once or twice a year to shoot duck and collect specimens. In October, when fishing has ceased and the wildfowl are undisturbed, the great shallow bay from the Scart Rock to the Inch is sometimes black with duck; such a number and variety of species are not to be seen in any other place in the British Isles. In one day you may see, perchance, mallard, widgeon, teal, shoveller, tufted, scaup and pochard ducks, sheldrakes, pink-footed, bean, graylag, and Canada geese, goosanders, grebes, and several kinds of waders, snipe being specially numerous. There is no means, however, of getting at the real body of the duck, and I trust there never will be, for in both spring and autumn Loch Leven is the great meeting-place and sanctuary of the ducks—a sort of ‘gathering of the clans’—for the whole of the south-east of Scotland, where to do more than take a slight toll from its outward fringe would be an unpardonable sin.

An occasional day's gunning on the shores and islands is another matter: it does no harm and has no disturbing effect on the great lake. Twice have I been lucky enough to witness the actual arrival of the wild-geese at these great gatherings—a really wonderful and



MALLARD ALIGHTING

impressive sight. The first occasion was in October, when, lying off in a boat close to the Inch (the long flat island which is their regular winter home), I heard the first 'honk' of the season coming from away up in the vast expanse of the blue heaven. For a long

time nothing could I see, until at last a tiny speck appeared in the sky as far up as the eye could reach, and, watching it intently, I saw it grow into the form of a goose that was slowly descending in great spirals. This bird was followed at regular intervals by others of the tribe subdivided into little parties of from six to ten individuals. The leader was evidently some very old barren bird who had perhaps guided the great army of geese annually from their summer home in the Arctic wastes down to their winter abode in the south. She seemed to occupy a long time—quite an hour—in making her descent, and kept up the whole time an incessant reiteration of goose talk, which was doubtless perfectly understood by the great company which followed her down the spiral track. Each little family party was led by an old bird (doubtless one or other of the parents), who kept calling to the other leaders all the time. In this descent the birds seemed to hardly beat their wings at all, but to be simply soaring down from the clouds. The prime leader came down immediately above the Inch, and while she was preparing to alight there were still small companies evolving themselves from the blue expanse, until at last there must have been some fifteen hundred birds actually on the wing, all in process of descent, and all following one another at regular intervals. By-and-by, when the leading geese had settled, the parties at the rear seemed to straggle more, and longer intervals occurred between them; yet they kept coming in all day as I roamed round and about the lake, till by the evening, when I disturbed the company, there must have been between two and three thousand geese sitting on the island. These great flocks always remain for a few days on Loch Leven, and then away they go, distributing themselves in favourite localities throughout the south-east of





THE ARCTIC REGIONS.

1889.





WILD GESE ARRIVING FROM THE ARCTIC REGIONS.

Loch Leven, October 7th 1883.



Scotland—all except five or six hundred, which remain on the lake until the following spring. They are nearly all pink-footed geese, with a few graylags and bean.

And now let me say a word as to the intellectual capacity of these birds. People say 'as silly as a goose,' but never was a more foolish comparison. Of all birds, geese are the most intelligent. Conspicuous, too, are they for bravery and domestic affection. In the particular art of defending themselves against the wiles of the fowler, whether afloat or ashore, they have absolutely no equal, and this, I need hardly say, adds greatly to the pleasure of pursuing them. It is a game of mind against mind, and one in which the goose is not uncommonly the winner. As an illustration of the amazing sagacity of the race and the extraordinary precautions they will take to ensure their safety when an enemy is about or suspected, let me relate what happened to myself one spring-time at Loch Leven.

After several failures to secure some graylags and pink-footed geese that I was anxious to obtain, I determined to put into practice a plan which had been for some time in my mind. I had noticed that geese, when disturbed off the Inch, settled down, after a long flight, far out on the lake, and then, when the shooters had left, they returned to the island, their favourite feeding-ground, gradually and in small parties. My idea was, of course, to dig a pit, cover myself up with reeds, and then await the return of the birds, which, I hoped, would eventually come near enough to give me a fair chance.

A big flock of geese were within sight on the island as we approached it, but these left as soon as we got within five hundred



yards. So after looking about for a suitable spot I soon got to work with my spade to make a hole. It was tough work, for the ground was frozen hard ; but at last it was done, and a hole some four feet deep was excavated. In this, standing nearly upright, I could see well through the interstices of the few dry reeds which surrounded and covered me. Everything was snug, and except for the intense cold, against which I was only moderately provided, I was quite comfortable. Round about my shelter was a perfectly open space of several hundred yards of frosted grass, cropped close and covered with feathers and droppings of the birds which regularly wintered here ; so I felt sure that if I could hold out against the cold some of the geese would, sooner or later, come to feed within shot.

I had been in my hole for about twenty minutes when I heard the clamour of a single old goose coming towards the south end of the long island, and watching her closely I noticed that she regularly ‘ranged’ the whole ground, as a setter does a hillside. No part of the whole island escaped her attention ; there was not a stretch of ground over which she did not fly ; and at last—just as I was expecting her to come and pitch on the green—away she went. She was clearly a scout sent on ahead to spy out the land, and had but to return and report.

Another quarter of an hour passed, and I began to think that the spy had given an unsatisfactory account of her investigations, when there suddenly burst from the assembled geese sitting out on the lake a loud clamour. I thought from the sound that they were all coming my way, but on looking in their direction I presently saw three small v’s of five or six birds each detach themselves from the

main body and head towards the island. These patrols exactly repeated the manœuvres of the first scout, ranging the island backwards and forwards from end to end, and at one time passing over my head within sixty yards. They, too, in turn returned to the lake to report on their reconnaissance, and then, after a lapse of nearly half an hour, the great chorus of bass and tenor 'Waugh—waugh—waughs' commenced again, and up rose the whole flock of some six hundred birds and flew low and straight for the island. This time no precautions were taken; they flew straight to the corner of the green plateau nearest the water—about a hundred and fifty yards from my retreat. At first I thought they were coming right on to me, in which case I should have raised myself to shoot, and thus have missed the most interesting exhibition of wild-geese intelligence it has ever been my good fortune to see.

Immediately the big flock pitched they all stood up with 'strained necks, looking and listening for any sign of an enemy.

For the space of a full minute not one of them moved; then down went a few necks, a slight murmur of satisfaction arose, and the majority began to walk slowly about and crop the grass. Soon all were busily engaged except five or six birds, which I noticed kept on the alert the whole time, walking about quickly and suspiciously on all four sides of the main body and never attempting to feed. About ten minutes elapsed, when I distinctly saw a goose which had been busily eating go up to one of the sentinels and touch him on the back with its bill. Immediately the sentry lowered his head and commenced to pick at the grass, while the goose who had been just feeding raised his neck and began to keep watch. It was their mode of changing sentry. After this, as the

geese slowly worked round and were gradually approaching my position, I kept particular watch on the sentries, and twice again saw other geese come up, peck them in a friendly sort of way, as much as to say 'I'll do my turn now,' and thus relieve the look-out of his duty.

Perhaps two hours and a half had elapsed, and I was beginning to feel cold and cramped in my hole, when the feeding geese, arranged in the form of a horn, began to come straight towards me. As they advanced slowly I became more and more excited at the prospect they opened up. Never before had I enjoyed so close and so uninterrupted a view as I was now to have. On and on they came, till the middle of the flock was within twenty yards of my ambush, and, looking at them as I did from the level of the ground, their size seemed simply prodigious. Still they continued to walk on unsuspectingly, several actually passing by on either side of me within a distance of three or four yards; indeed, one pinkfoot came so close that I could almost have touched him with the gun had I outstretched my arm; but his sharp little eye did not catch mine peeping at him; he suspected nothing, and his sense of smell was apparently no better than a man's.

Now, what I wanted most of all was a 'bean' goose, a bird I had not previously shot here, though I knew that the species frequented the lake; and when the pack were within forty yards of me I distinctly saw one, recognising him at once by his brilliant yellow bill and legs. But he soon passed away amongst the others, and what with the continuous gabble, the proximity of the birds, the fear of showing myself, and the general excitement of the position, I could not keep my eye on him. At last, when fairly surrounded by









WILD GEESE THROWING OUT SENTRIES.



the geese, I came to the conclusion that a pinkfoot or a graylag in hand was better than a bean goose in the clouds, so I determined to climb out of my hole into a sitting position and try to 'rake' the flock as they rose. The idea was good, but the practice indifferent.

As I edged myself up, and was moving my gun up to the 'ready,' there suddenly arose on all sides such a perfect inferno of sound that it seemed as if all the wild-geese in creation had dropped from the skies and were yelling into my ears. Such a Babel of anserine tongues and such a clatter of flapping wings I never heard either before or since. In the excitement I let fly at a graylag and missed him clean (he was almost too close to fire at), but my second barrel ripped into a straggling party of pinkfoots that were just rising, killing two old ganders and wounding a third, which went 'hirpling' out towards the lake in a hopeless condition. Not altogether the bag I had hoped for, but it might have been worse, and at any rate I had enjoyed such a view of wild pinkfooted and graylag geese as few sportsmen are ever lucky enough to see.

Of the many happy days that I have spent on the waters of beautiful Loch Leven and its reeded shores I need hardly speak. Whether it was in August, when duck and snipe swarmed in the surrounding marshes; or in late autumn, when great masses of diving and surface-feeding ducks rose in clouds from its placid waters; or in spring, when all the lovely birds of passage that come and nest were there in their best plumage, it was always delightful to wander about, enjoying the pastoral scenery, the varying sport, and the constant passage of some wild thing.

Walking round its banks in August, I have on three occasions

killed as many as fifty ducks in a day's shooting—once sixty-two and twenty-two snipe. Another glorious day, too, I well remember when, tired of shooting round the lake, I was hailed by the late Sir William Elliot and Mr. P. D. Malloch in their boat. They had worked up to Duncan's Corner, without much success, as there had been no breeze. Now, however, the wind had sprung up from the east, and Sir William advised me to come in, kindly asking me to take his rod for a while. Almost as soon as we started, the fish began to move, and in the drift from the Corner to the south bay, lasting about an hour and a half, Mr. Malloch and I secured eighteen trout weighing twenty-one pounds,<sup>1</sup> each of us capturing a three-pounder—altogether as perfect a day as any sportsman could possibly wish for.

Of late years Loch Leven trout have become smaller, and are moreover much more difficult to take. No one except Mr. Malloch seems to thoroughly understand their various idiosyncrasies and fluctuating tastes. One would think he must have a private arrangement with the fish themselves, so commonly correct is his forecast of the day's menu.

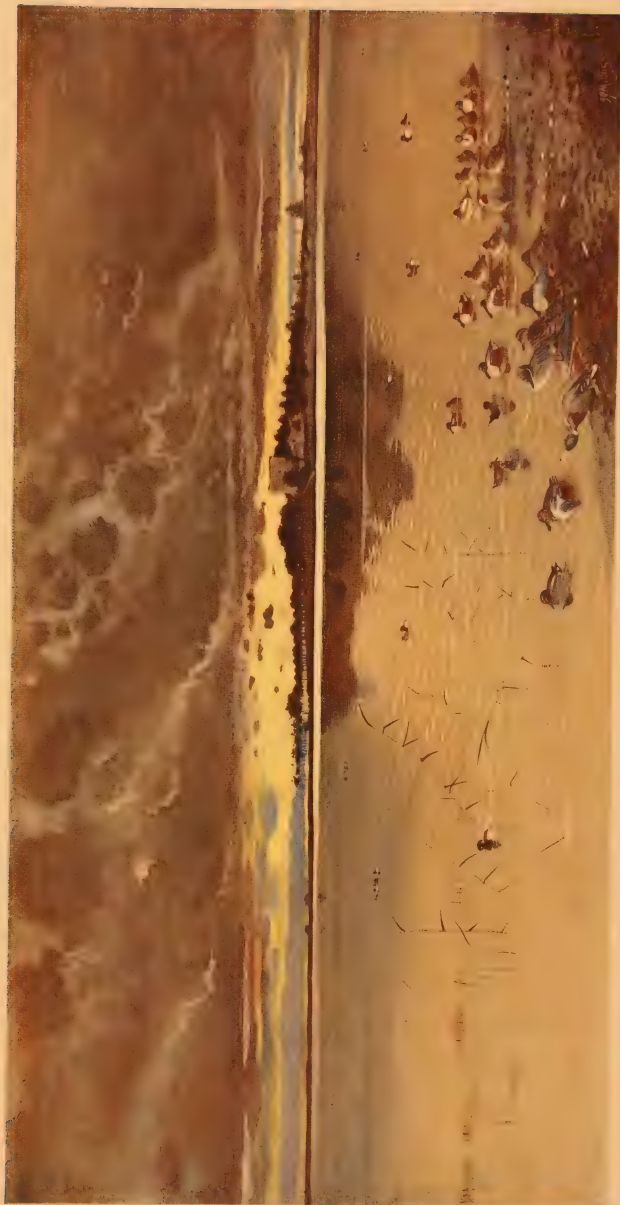
The best day's shooting at mallard that ever fell to my lot was on Loch Leven. On December 13, 1885, I went there with Mr. Malloch on one of my usual winter visits to shoot and collect birds. We had hardly started with the boat, rowing close to the Castle Island, when a gale sprang up from the south-west and set every duck on the great lake flying about and moving for shelter; and now, seeing that a good many birds were apparently pitching

<sup>1</sup> In one drift from Duncan's Corner to the boathouses Mr. Malloch took, once, forty-nine trout weighing forty-nine pounds.









LOCH LEVEN IN SPRING.



fairly close in to the Castle Island, we landed, I going to the north and my companion ensconcing himself at another point. A good many duck soon commenced to alight, but nearly all just out of shot; when, chancing to turn round and look through the trees, I saw that many more were sheltering immediately under the Reed Bour, a small island close by, covered with trees and heavy undergrowth. There then we made our way, and I landed whilst Mr. Malloch went off in the boat, to the far end of the lake, to see what he could do by lying-up on the Inch, another favoured shelter some two miles away. Hardly had he taken his departure when a small bunch of mallard came in close to my shelter and I got a brace of them. In a minute or two another lot made their appearance, till 'thick and fast they came at last, and more and more and more.' I have never in my life had such continuous banging at one stand—at duck, at any rate. At intervals of every few minutes two or three little grey specks would appear away down wind, and would presently look bigger and bigger. As soon as these birds saw the three pneumatic decoys I had anchored out to attract them there was a sudden movement of recognition, a dropping of the wings, a clamour of welcome, and then, as they were about to alight, I would show myself, and as they shot upwards again blaze away. After about two hours of this excellent sport, 'Jet,' who was the most gallant of water-dogs, began to show signs of cramp, which was not surprising, seeing that almost every duck she fetched from the water meant one hundred and fifty yards' swim against (even under this comparative shelter) a heavy head wind, and on a bitterly cold day. Say a bird was killed at thirty yards from the island, by the time 'Jet' reached it, it was seventy or a

hundred yards away, so rapidly was it carried out by the storm. Consequently, when two or more birds were down, I began to lose some of them, as my dog could only retrieve one at a time. The rest—all she failed to reach—drifted away a mile and a half to the lee shore, where I hoped to gather them later on.

It was noticeable that during this gale no duck besides mallard sought shelter, except one bunch of fifteen teal, which came swinging in two or three times with the intention of alighting, but were foiled at each attempt. Once it was 'Jet' fetching a duck that alarmed them, at another time I had fired at a single mallard as they were coming in. At last the coast seemed clear, and they came right on, and were about to pitch on the water amongst my decoys when, showing myself, they rose again, and I put in my two barrels at the exact moment when the flock 'bunched' together as they turned. The result of these two raking shots was that no less than eleven teal lay dead upon the water—the greatest number of duck I have ever shot with two 12-bore cartridges. 'Jet,' cold and miserable as she was, at once dashed in, and before the floating birds were too far away recovered four. The rest soon disappeared, carried away by the gale. The mallard continued to come in till three in the afternoon, when Mr. Malloch appeared, having shot twenty-five duck on the west end of the Inch, where, he said, the birds had come in well. For me 'Jet' had recovered from the waters fifty-six mallard and four teal, and as the storm had somewhat abated we made for the lee shore to pick up my 'drifters.' On nearing the point where I expected to find the first of these, two hooded crows sprang up and soared over something they had been eating, which we soon found to be one of my duck. And the same thing







LOCH SPYNIE. SUNSET.





1000 2000, 2000 1000

happened to twenty-six birds that had fallen to my gun and were now lying on the shore. The hoodies, numbering about a hundred, had effectually picked and torn the breast of every one. Thus actually were shot on this great day 108 mallard and teal, all of which, except the damaged birds, were taken home and made use of. Both there and elsewhere I have enjoyed capital sport in Highland lakes and swamps, but never can I remember having been so satisfied with my luck as upon this occasion. It was the more delightful as it was quite unexpected.

Loch Spynie, rendered famous by the writings of Charles St. John, may be described as half lake and half bog. Though the greater part of the adjoining swamps, where in former years much of the best duck and snipe ground was to be found, has now been drained, it still remains one of the three best duck resorts in Scotland, and in many respects the most varied and charming. At the western end stands the old ruin of Spynie Castle. Seen from across the lake and marsh, this picturesque structure rears itself in quiet and romantic grandeur above the shrieking gullery.

Great numbers of duck and teal make Loch Spynie their permanent home; wild-swans come almost every winter, and in the spring, when the shovellers and pochards have arrived with the black-headed gulls, the open waters of the lake are a sight to gladden the heart of any lover of Nature. There is a peculiar old-world charm about this loch, felt by everyone who knows the place, but hardly to be expressed in words. Those who have wandered round its banks, pressed through its great reed-bed with the duck rising on all sides, and enjoyed its varying sport, can well understand the enthusiasm that shines through every page of St. John's



delightful book. Pleasant, too, is it to know that the traditional hospitality of the neighbourhood is well maintained by Captain Dunbar-Brander, the present owner of the loch. To him and his two merry sons—both first-rate sportsmen—I am indebted for some of the happiest days I have spent in Scotland, and it is to their generosity in allowing me to shoot whatever specimens I desired that I have added some rare and interesting birds to my collection. Captain Dunbar-Brander, being himself a keen naturalist and sportsman, has ever extended to other naturalists a helping hand and a more than hospitable welcome. I never spent a day at Pitgavenny without returning laden with the produce of his garden, lake, and his 'dookit.'

Murthly Bog, though less known than Loch Leven and Spynie, is a bog pure and simple, with small open sheets of water perhaps twenty yards in diameter interspersed over its reeded surface. The main bog is about three-quarters of a mile long, and, the greater part of it being walkable, access to the best lying ground of the duck is easy. My father rented the Murthly shooting for twelve years, and there we were always sure of good sport, whether in autumn or winter, as a fair bag could be obtained from August 1 to March 1. Duck and teal and snipe were especially numerous, and would doubtless be still more so were it not for the black-headed gullery which during late years has assumed great proportions.

A wonderful sight it was when the first shot of the season was heard at Murthly Bog. Instantly a thousand duck and teal spring into the air, and the ear is greeted with the noise and clamour of rising waterfowl. Many fly straight away at once to the Black Loch at Tay Mount or elsewhere, but the greater number keep sweeping

round and settling again, either in the big bog or 'Bog Bushes,' another marsh about a quarter of a mile away, and each in turn furnishes its quota to the bag. At the beginning of the season, when friends were entertained, we usually shot the bog with five guns,



LOCH SPYNIE—DAWN

two walking up in line, whilst three were posted in a semicircle at the end; but I have noticed that three good guns generally did quite as much as half a dozen, owing to the lesser disturbance. Duck and snipe dislike to feel that they are surrounded, and make right away at once if they suspect this, in which case few shots are obtained;

whilst, on the other hand, one gun may walk quietly round the bog two days after a shooting party and obtain a much better bag.

We generally shot the bog for the first time on August 12, and after the duck and snipe had been bombarded the grouse on the small moor surrounding the marshes received a certain amount of attention, whilst later in the season the fir woods which surrounded the moor were visited for roe, pheasants, black-game, woodcock, and capercailzie.

The following particulars of odd days' shooting in and around the bog may serve to illustrate its capabilities:<sup>1</sup>

| Date           | Place                       | Guns  | Partridge | Pheasant | Hares | Rabbits | Woodcock | Snipe | Duck | Grouse | Black-game | Various | Total |
|----------------|-----------------------------|---|-----------|----------|-------|---------|----------|-------|------|--------|------------|---------|-------|
| Sept. 6, 1884  | The bog                     | J. G. M. . . . .<br>Marquis of Granby                     | 7         | —        | 8     | 1       | 1        | 14    | 12   | 9      | 1          | 5       | 58    |
| Oct. 1, 1884   | Bog and small woods         | F. M. Lucas . . .<br>J. G. M. . . . .<br>J. E. M. . . . . | 36        | 34       | 12    | 7       | 1        | 10    | 6    | 5      | 2          | 2       | 113   |
| Sept. 28, 1885 | Bog and fields              | E. Newton . . .<br>J. G. M. . . . .                       | 68        | —        | 7     | 4       | 1        | 15    | 6    | 1      | 1          | 2       | 105   |
| Oct. 7, 1885   | Bog, small woods and fields | J. G. M. . . . .  | 24        | 15       | 3     | 6       | 1        | 10    | 5    | 1      | 3          | 1       | 71    |
| Oct. 10, 1886  | Bog, wood, and fields       | J. G. M. . . . .  | 36        | 17       | 3     | 10      | 1        | 18    | 1    | 2      | 1          | 7       | 96    |
| Nov. 2, 1889   | Woods                       | 5 guns . . . . .  | 6         | 79       | 14    | 67      | 7        | 2     | 1    | 2      | 1          | 14 roe  | 200   |

Good free swamps, much frequented by duck in the autumn months, are still to be found in Scotland. One of these places, open to the public, I have visited every year when in Scotland on August 1. This ground is a perfect duck and snipe home, and were it preserved would be among the finest marshes in Europe; now few men ever go there, and of those who do most of them just

<sup>1</sup> Since the expiration of our lease Mr. Walter Fotheringham, the owner of Murthly, has had some exceptionally good days on the Moss. On one occasion, amongst other game, no less than 105 teal were killed by three guns.

scrape along the edge in boats, not caring to trust themselves to the treacherous bogs, which require a special knowledge. Here one can obtain what the fowler would call a really good day's sport by plodding along knee-deep in the mud, regardless of plunging into unknown depths that await him at every turn.

Here is the result of some odd days I had in these grounds :

|                                     | Snipe | Duck | Plover | Guns                 |
|-------------------------------------|-------|------|--------|----------------------|
| August 1, 1882 <sup>1</sup> . . . . | 9     | 38   | —      | J. G. M.             |
| August 1, 1885 . . . .              | 12    | 25   | —      | P. D. Malloch        |
| December 29, 1886 . . . .           | 31    | 1    | —      | J. G. M.             |
| August 1, 1895 . . . .              | 8     | 15   | —      | J. G. M.             |
| August 1, 1898 . . . .              | 12    | 12   | 15     | J. G. M.<br>S. Steel |

<sup>1</sup> As many duck were lost as recovered, as we had no dog.

Sport of this kind is frequently overlooked, simply from the lack of knowledge where to go and at what season duck and snipe are 'in' on the various grounds; but these the gunner must find out for himself, as those before him have had to do, for it is only fair that those who have bought this experience by hard work should not be ousted by the new-comer who has paid nothing for it, either in purse or person.

It is hardly necessary for me to enumerate the minor wildfowl resorts situated throughout the mainland of Scotland, but almost every county has some bog which affords the wild sport which is the best of all gun shooting.

In 1898 I rented a little shooting in one of the outer islands of Scotland, and in nine days there fell to my own gun (for a friend I had with me was unable to shoot) two hundred and nine duck and snipe. On the same ground the following year Mr. Hesketh

Prichard, the novelist, and I got two hundred and fifty duck and snipe in ten days' actual shooting.

If, as seems to be thought, the Wild Birds' Protection Act has rendered little or no service to birds in general, it has at least materially encouraged and shielded the ducks, who, with the exception of the garganey, are in our islands well on the increase. This is very satisfactory to all lovers of sport and natural history, and to its benign protection we may perhaps attribute the unusual extension of breeding range which has of late years been so noticeable in the case of the wigeon, the shoveller, the pintail, the gadwall, the tufted and the scaup. The wigeon, the pintail, and the scaup may be said to be moving south in our islands; whilst the shoveller, the gadwall, and the tufted seem to be extending in all directions, even as far northward as the Orkneys, where a few years ago they were almost unknown, even as winter visitors.

Curiously enough, whilst Scotland has many lakes and estuaries which are constantly frequented by duck during the winter months, it possesses very few narrow rivers whose more or less sluggish streams would naturally attract wildfowl. This, of course, is owing to the mountainous nature of the country. Streams rapidly rushing from the hills form, in their turn, swift and rocky rivers, where there is neither bank nor bottom feeding, and so we have few waters there like the Test, the Hampshire Beaulieu, or the Norfolk streams. The only two rivers in the east of Scotland on which I have ever seen any great quantities of resident birds are the Earn, near Perth, and the Isla, which flows into the Tay near Stanley. On the upper Tay, near Taymouth Castle, there are several attractive backwaters always full of duck in the winter and summer.



On the Earn at Duncrub they kill four or five hundred duck every winter, whilst forty duck in a day is not an unusual bag. Higher up, too, I have seen considerable gatherings about Trinity Gask. With the Isla I am better acquainted, as my father rented the Stobhall shooting there for four years, including four miles of the best of this river. In 1894, between October 15 and December 30, I shot over three hundred duck on the river. My plan was to build gorse shelters at various points in the bends of the river, and then to send two keepers, one to each end of the beat. One of them advanced until he reached my hiding-place, where he stopped; the other one then walked up the duck from his end, and in this way a double beat was obtained. The duck soon got to know the points of danger, but by frequently moving the hiding-place I generally obtained a few shots. Perfectly still days were attended with failure, as the birds flew too high even for the 8-bore, and swung away from any object of suspicion, whilst the first equinoctial gales in October proved to be the most productive season.



A MORNING'S SHOOTING WITH THE 8-BORE. FEB. 12, 1888  
25 scaup, 2 mallard, 2 teal, 1 wigeon, 2 golden-eye, 10 plover; total 42

## CHAPTER V

### A MORNING WITH THE 8-BORE

IT had been blowing hard for several days from the west, so I thought that a run down to the coast might be attended with the capture of some of those sea-ducks in which I took a special interest. I wanted to obtain not only a complete series of the

various ducks which inhabit the British Islands, but enough specimens to illustrate the periodical changes of plumage in a duck's life. To do this means, of course, considerable slaughter, one may have to kill hundreds of the same species to secure a good example of each period of change; but, *pace* the Humanitarians, ducks must die that aldermen may dine, and surely it is a more noble fate to perish in the cause of science than in that of the dinner-table. The vast majority of the slain do find their way there—one could do nothing else with them; but the one treasure (possibly only one in fifty) is safely packed away in cotton-wool, skinned and preserved for the collection.

At this time (1888) my mind was set on scaup, of which I was anxious to complete my series. Adults, I knew, were scarce; but I also knew that for immatures there was no better place than the Eden Estuary in Fife; there I kept two punts, with Jack Pinkney, an old Cambridgeshire fenman, to look after them and assist me in my work.

A good fellow was Jack—steady, intelligent, and well educated. In his younger days he was engaged as a puntsman at Ely, but forsaking this for the more lucrative work of an eel-catcher in the fen ditches, he managed to put by a little money, and then went off to Aberdeen as secretary to a big fish-curing establishment. Here for some years Fortune smiled upon him. He continued to increase his store until, allured by the success of some friends who had made a little fortune, as owners and fitters-up of boats for the herring trade, he started for himself in that line of business, only to encounter the worst herring season on record, and the consequent loss of every shilling he had. Another chance then presented

itself. There were eels in the Eden, many of them had been noted by a friend in the herring fleet, an old fensman like himself; and as these dainties do not commend themselves to the Scottish palate, they were allowed to come and go in their annual migrations, unmolested by spears or sniggles, or other devices for their capture.

In Jack's eyes it was an unworked field promising considerable profits; so, joining an invalid brother of his at the little village of Guard Bridge, he spent his time in watching his eel-boxes, fishing with hand lines out in the river, and sending all he caught to a dealer in Leadenhall Market, who paid him as he found it convenient. It was a rough and lonely life, for his brother was chronically afflicted, and he himself too well educated to make friends with the rough mill-hands at the paper works, who, in turn, regarded him as a foreigner and usurper of local rights. Those boxes of his, that for three or four years were constantly going and coming from London, looked like untold wealth filched from them; but all this time poor Jack could only just manage to buy his tea, his bread and butter, and his beloved 'Dundee Advertiser,' which told him all the news of the great world he had left behind.

Then came another stroke of bad luck. Eels began to grow scarce, and constant wet and exposure had left their mark on one who had never been particularly strong. The tea and the 'Dundee' had to go, and but for the fortunate possession of an old 'Brown Bess' he and his brother must have starved during the two fearful winters of 1881 and 1882. Happily duck came to the rescue—flocks of them, driven on shore by the continuous storm—and potting at them at close range, as they sat in the water, he made a few shillings

now and then by walking into St. Andrews and selling all he shot. In this precarious position I found him in the autumn of 1884. The summer-eel fishing had again proved a failure, and he was only too ready to come with me and work my punt.

I soon found that I had obtained the services of a capable and devoted follower, and one who really enjoyed watching the shooting and having some one to talk to. His skill in handling the punt when manœuvring to birds was quite extraordinary; no



THE ESTUARY OF THE EDEN, FIFE  
HOODED CROWS BREAKING SHELLFISH BY DROPPING THEM ON THE ROCKS



order, however difficult to fulfil, embarrassed him for a moment. One word from me, and he would keep the boat on 'swing' to right or left as I fired side shots at passing birds, taking care at the same time to keep its head well up to the waves. An essential point this; for though on land the recoil of an 8-bore is hardly felt, it is enough to upset the balance of a shooter kneeling in a small and unsteady boat, and may possibly topple him overboard if for a moment the boat be allowed to drift. Hence the necessity for a skilled companion in this class of shooting. Of course you share with him any hard work, such as poling long distances to and from the shooting ground, or whenever no game is in sight—a pleasant and invigorating exercise, with the advantage that while standing up as you push the punt along with the long poling rods, you can personally spy out all the likely ground ahead.

My favourite boat at this time was a single-handed punt, originally designed for a gunner cruising alone, for it drew so little water that we could run it into shallow channels unnavigable by boats of greater draft. For two seasons we used it regularly, and should have probably continued to do so, but for the disaster related in a previous chapter, when a better and safer boat was built.

At six o'clock in the morning of February 12, 1888, Jack came along to the little inn on the bank of the river and called me up; and while it was still dark we repaired to the water-side and launched the little single-handed punt which lay close by, and as frost now appeared, following a stormy day, we knew that there must be plenty of duck about.

There was but the faintest streak of grey in the east as we poled slowly down past the glowing paper works and entered the narrow channel, which leads to the sea, four miles away. No sign of man or beast was anywhere to be seen; nothing but great mud flats, shallow ditches, and innumerable mussel banks, with here and there on the mud itself great patches of the green sea *Zostera marina*, or wigeon grass, on which all the geese and surface-feeding ducks delight to feed. The channel along which we now allowed ourselves to drift was barely fifty yards wide, and as we turned each of its bends mallard kept rising in pairs in the most tantalising way, their calls telling us plainly that they were well within shot, though not one of them could we see. We had obviously started rather too early, and must rest awhile in our course down the channel lest we disturbed the fowl in their favourite haunts, where many would certainly remain and feed even after the full light of day appeared.

And now, sheltered to some extent by a sloping bank of mud, we patiently wait and listen to the whistling of pinions, knowing that in a few minutes we shall be able to see for a second or two some of these grey forms that are winging their way to the open sea in their early morning flight.

Presently there is a rush of wings close past us. It is a bunch of teal, and I let drive both barrels in a snap shot as I catch sight of the tail of the departing string. The birds respond at once. Two heavy splashes on the water mark the success of the shots, and a tumult of rising mallard shows that they too have been feeding close at hand. Launching the punt in a moment we are barely touching two white flecks of foam before it is seen that I

have secured a brace of teal—the first trophies of the day. Back, then, to the shelter of the bank for a few minutes only. As there is little likelihood of more duck coming from behind us and heading towards the sea, we start again and drift in silence down the narrow channel, looking out for any late feeders guttering along the banks, who are sure to be seen as they rise and become silhouetted against the pale dawn. Our chance soon comes, for on rounding a little bend there is a loud quacking as two mallards, duck and drake, rise in confusion within fifteen yards. As they come against the light the pair are close together, affording me an easy shot, on which the duck falls dead, and the drake, with a broken wing, lies struggling on the mud some thirty yards away. I must chase him back to the water and the light before I can see him well enough to get in my second barrel, and this entails some delay. I got him, however, just as he was about to enter a deep offshoot of the main stream, had he dived into which, I might have lost my prey.

A good start this—twenty minutes, four duck—and we had not yet reached the first bay or swelling in the stream, where I knew that a good flock of wigeon, and sometimes a bunch of pintail, usually lay even after nine and ten o'clock, unless disturbed by some shore-shooter. On approaching the bay a distant chorus of 'Whe-oh's' tells us that something has moved the wigeon—that they are on the wing and coming towards us. It is not quite light enough to see the pack, but they swing round, coming for a moment within shot, and after turning again over their late feeding-ground up-stream they come—this time at a great height. Still, the shot is not an impossible one for the 8-bore, and as they are well together there is a fair chance of one No. 1 shot reaching its destination. Trying it, I

distinctly hear one or two pellets tell, and almost immediately afterwards a young male wigeon stretches out his wings and comes soaring to the mud quite dead.



JACK PINKNEY AND SINGLE-HANDED PUNT

The report of the 8-bore on this still morning sets everything on the move within half a mile. Redshanks, oyster-catchers, and curlews are here in abundance, all protesting against this intrusion upon their privacy, whilst a host of mallard are seen rising in the distance, and heading away across the 'Links' in the direction of the sea.

We shall see no more now until we come within view of the big mussel banks, where parties of the true sea-ducks are sure to be scattered about in the tideway, for these birds do not like to dive deeper than necessary for the tiny mussels, cockles, and razor-fish on which they live, and the tide has still another hour to ebb. There is a nice bunch of golden plovers swinging round and round over one of the flats; but they too have been disturbed by the last shot, and will not settle again to feed. We make two attempts to get near them, but they sit watching in such extended order that I don't care to fire on the chance of getting only one bird and perhaps spoiling a better chance.

We are getting well down the river now, but the channel itself is still only a narrow silver thread winding its intricate way between the great mudflats a quarter of a mile broad on either side. The distant sand-banks, however, with their piles of rotting seaware, show that we are getting on to more true maritime ground, for at high water this is all one great lagoon or estuary, even taking on the roll of sea, which now breaks far away, three miles to the east, in lines that look like carded wool. A golden-eye or two now go 'singing' by, keeping well away over the middle of the main channel, and (as usual in this part of the river) out of shot. Further on, as the stream begins to widen, we see a large flock of white birds, and at their side four little black dots which look very like duck. On a nearer view the former prove to be a large flock of common gulls washing themselves in the presence of three immature scaup and a female golden-eye. Now I should like those scaup—must have them if possible; but as on these waters golden-eye will very rarely allow a punt







A FLYING SHOT WITH THE EIGHT-BORE.





A FLYING SHOT WITH THE EIGHT-BORE.

to approach within shot, I fear my chance of getting them is but small. We must have a try, however, especially as they are close in to a bank and well 'on feed.' At two hundred yards distance from them the gulls are all on the wing, and the golden-eye, taking the hint, at once stops feeding and means to rise also, in which case she is almost sure to take away the scaup. Yes, there she goes, and up go the necks of the scaup. In another moment they will be off. But, no! they are immature, and have, perhaps, never seen a punt before. They must think about it; and while they are doing this, Jack, poling as hard as he can, brings us another hundred yards nearer to them. At eighty yards I lay down the 8-bore and take up the 12-bore, for scaup, like many other heavy sea-ducks, must face the wind, and so come thirty yards nearer the boat ere they can swing away. Then, as they rise and come by, an easy double ought to have been obtained, but I missed badly with my left and only secured one bird.

We were in luck this morning, however, for, a moment later, I noticed a big flock of scaup close in to the Tents Muir shore, and not four hundred yards away. That they had not risen at my last shots surprises me; the more so as I could distinctly see two or three old white-backed fellows glistening in their ranks. They had obviously been but slightly disturbed, so we resolved to lie by for ten minutes, to let them get over their fears and settle down to feed again.

When some time had passed by and the scaup seemed quite quiet, we decided to retreat slightly and cross the stream to their side of the channel, as the first move in our game, for it is always bad generalship to advance on duck, even the more confiding sea-ducks,



directly from the open water. This manœuvre was successfully accomplished, and then a slow advance almost under cover of the mud mussel-banks was easy.

When within two hundred yards of the spot we aimed at we found that nearly the whole flock had disappeared, having swum up a narrow branch channel which itself ended in a sort of *cul-de-sac* about eighty yards at right angles to the main stream. Nothing could have been better; for if, as was highly probable, the two or three outliers who were in front of us, followed the same line as the rest of the flock, we should be able, under cover of the banks, to get within twenty yards of the whole company without being seen. One by one the few stragglers passed out of our sight up the neck, and as the last turned the corner it needed but a few swift strokes with Jack's little ironshod poling stick to place us in a position commanding the mouth of the *cul-de-sac*. Bearing in mind, then, what I have said before as to the extreme reluctance of sea-duck to fly over land or even mud, I knew that this fine flock of some seventy scaup would in all probability make for the main channel and pass close to me, even if I fired at them a long shot with the 8-bore. And this they did. The whole bunch were packed closely together about sixty yards away, and as they rose the 8-bore raked them in the thickest place, killing three outright and disabling two more. Then seizing the 12-bore I got in my two barrels as the flock rushed by within twenty-five yards and knocked down three others. Two of these were only wing-tipped birds, and, falling in the channel behind me, I had to turn my immediate attention to them. One was easily disposed of; but the other, an old hen bird, gave us quite a long chase down the

channel before she was secured. It took us some minutes to return to the scene of the first shot, and then we found that one of the first birds knocked over by the 8-bore had disappeared, and



HAULING OVER A MUSSEL-BANK

hunt as hard as we could no trace of him was to be found. Still we had secured seven out of eight birds down, and were well satisfied with our luck so far.

Not long after this, and about a quarter of a mile further

down, we found two other little lots of scaup, consisting of three and six birds respectively; and 'jamming' the first lot as before in a side bay, I secured all three birds. The other little party took alarm just as we were getting nicely within shot, but a long chance offering as the birds turned, I killed a young male at about ninety yards, a single No. 1 shot striking it in the eye.

We had now reached the last of the big bays formed by the St. Andrews' sand dunes and the northern shore. Here the channel at its lowest ebb is some hundred yards in breadth, and at one particular point where it widens out it is a favourite feeding-ground for both golden-eye and scaup. As on this still sunny morning no early gunner from St. Andrews had disturbed them, several little parties of these ducks could be seen resting in the estuary, and we neglected a good chance at scaup by going for half a dozen Brent geese (rare visitors here) which alighted on the northern shore, but rose, as usual, just out of shot. Then some more scaup attracted our attention. They were feeding quite close in to some bait gatherers who were catching the early worm, and from one party I secured two, and from another one, after losing two others knocked down. This was due to greediness on my part, for on the shot I saw several single birds and small lots of golden-eye working up close to a point near at hand, and thought I might secure one before dispatching the two cripples. The latter must, in the meantime, have dived out under the punt and got away into the main channel.

At the extreme point of the St. Andrews' links the channel again contracts. The mussel-banks are left behind, and so one passes between great sand flats for another mile and a half to the open sea. At low water and after hard weather from the east this



SPYING

long channel is a favourite shelter for both black and velvet scoter, nearly always immature birds; whilst the scaup moved from up the river pitch here, and single golden-eye keep constantly passing up and down the stream. Here there is a certain shoulder or protecting arm of the northern sands, where I often used to wait as long as the bank gave me cover whilst the punt itself was concealed at another *abri* higher up. At this point the duck frequently hug the shore sufficiently near to bring themselves within effective range of the 8-bore, and if a strong head wind is blowing, even within shot of a full-choke 12. On this particular morning, the weather being fine and still, not many birds passed within range; still I got a few long shots, four of which proved successful. The first was at a splendid old

drake golden-eye, quite a rarity here. He came down the river from behind, and had it not been for a timely whistle from Jack I should not have seen him. Just in time I turned to the right about, and then dropped him stone dead, right 'out of the clouds.' A shot like this, at a single bird with the 8-bore, is always highly satisfactory to the gunner, since for the greater part of his life he is banging away with a 12-bore, whose longest effective range straight up in the air is not more than thirty-five, or, at most, forty yards. When, therefore, he takes a bird cleanly with the larger bore, at a height of seventy or eighty yards, it is not without a certain sense of exaltation that he watches its descent to the earth. Not long after this an old female golden-eye coming in from the sea was so foolish as to pass right over me within thirty yards—a piece of rashness for which she paid the penalty of her life. A brace of scaup, too, were added to the bag from a small flock that passed by just as we were about to resume our outward journey towards the bar.

Running about on the wet sands were a big flock of godwits, which rose as we floated silently down the stream looking for velvet scoters, which were not here to-day; and, by-and-by, we saw at some distance from the channel, out on the sand flats to our left, what at first I took for a flock of oyster-catchers, but which, on our approach to within two hundred yards, proved to be sheldrakes. So tall are these beautiful ducks that, as they stand on the shore, they are almost sure to see the puntsman as soon as he sees them; and, being extremely wary and suspicious, the gunner seldom gets a chance at them from the boat until they have paired in March. The Eden estuary is not a great place for them, but there are always a few pairs about, several nesting annually in the Tents Muir ground.



We continued our progress down the stream, now at its lowest ebb, until we reached the bar itself, where the long slow swell of the North Sea makes itself felt, and here, resting on its gently rocking waters, we could enjoy the prospect of the landscape on either hand. To the south the prominent landmarks of the romantic old castle and cathedral of St. Andrews, where we used to play as children, stood out above the glassy waters of the bay. A few black scoters chased each other or dived for food in the glistening swell, whilst flocks of gulls rested here and there, or a single golden-eye on 'singing' pinions passed between the estuary and the sea. On so clear and still a morning we could see, far away to the north, away past innumerable sandy headlands right over the great Tay estuary, beyond Carnoustie links, even to the blue hills which rise above Arbroath and 'Thrums.'

After admiring the landscape for a while, a small crowd of dark spots, coming in from the sea and evidently making for the bar, gives hope of further scaup, for which I at once make ready with the 8-bore in case they should pass within shot. It is not usual for them to do so here, as the stream is wide and the sand banks are too far apart to force them into a fixed line. However, they give me a long chance at fully ninety yards, and by aiming high and well forward I manage to kill two of the lot, an old male and female; and then, the tide having begun to flow, we begin our return journey, with some hope of coming across small parties of scaup, and perhaps a good flock of golden or green plover, which often crowd together on the high-water mark as the tide forces them off the feeding grounds. The vigorous poling soon makes us warm, and it was not long before we were back again in the big bay by

the mussel-banks, where some scaup were sure to be found. The unusual number of shots I had fired this morning had, however, rather disturbed the place, for we saw only one lot of duck, and they were very 'kittle,' and would not wait for us; but as they passed right up-stream and did not break past out to sea, we hoped to see them again in a better place. Rounding the edge of the bay, which was now rapidly filling, we made out three scaup in front of us, and after some trouble worked to within sixty yards of them, when they rose and flew straight away from the punt, apparently uninjured by a shot from the 8-bore which rattled all round the bird I fired at.

On entering the narrow channel again the big flock of scaup came once more in sight—right up stream, about a quarter of a mile from us—and hardly had I noticed them when I observed two birds of the same species swimming out from a mussel-bank behind which they had been feeding not eighty yards away. As they were in so narrow a place I made sure they must pass us even if they rose at once, so I determined to fire at them at the risk of moving the big flock, which had all the appearance of scared birds. Again good luck stood in our favour. The two birds allowed us to come within thirty yards, and I killed them both with the 12-bore as they rose; nor was the pack up-stream alarmed by the double shot. Even if it had been so, I was quite certain that by pushing out into the stream immediately they rose I should at any rate get a good side shot with the larger weapon. Now, as the incoming tide was rapidly widening the stream, we could not give them any time to settle, so lying down at once in readiness for their flying by, I directed Jack to pole towards them as quickly as possible. The

scaup allowed us to approach to within one hundred and twenty yards, although they all had their heads up and were swimming up the narrow channel as fast as they could. Then with a great scurry up they rose, heading up stream. But only for a moment. They knew as well as I did that this was the limit of their range from the sea, so, turning rapidly, but still keeping close above the water, they swung round and came heading back towards the punt. When a flock is thus flying swiftly towards the shooter, there is never time to fire off both his guns, changing them himself, as a quick hand at the work can do when a flock *rises* close at hand and comes towards the boat; so, seeing that I must prepare for a close shot, I immediately dropped the 8- seized the 12-bore and fired both barrels as the birds dashed past. They were thickly packed, and a more scattering gun would probably have accounted for more, but, as it was, three 'deadens' and a 'winger' were a satisfactory result, and these were soon all gathered.

The little boat was now beginning to be well filled with the results of this excellent morning's sport, and as we stood up to pole leisurely home, with little hope of any further shooting, I saw in the far distance a big flock of green plover gathering near the paper mills half a mile away. We hardly expected that they would wait for us, as the morning whistles at the mill were already proclaiming in discordant tones that the day had really begun, whilst black figures began to move about on the shores and put all wild things on the alert. This morning, however, to my surprise, the plover did wait. We lay down at one hundred and fifty yards only, approached quietly, and I got in two barrels of the 12-bore at fairly close range, knocking over eight birds. Then, like stupid creatures,

forgetting that it was February instead of August, some came back and swung over their fallen companions, and I secured three more with high shots, to the great delight of my old friend 'Jeames,' an ardent shore-shooter, who had been watching the last shots from the high bank. Jeames—a well-known 'character' who worked in the mill alternately on the day or night shift—had been out late this morning, and, coming after me, had got nothing. So the present of a brace of mallard and half a dozen plover put him in the best



A DAY'S COLLECTING ON THE EDEN ESTUARY. FEBRUARY 1889

1 great northern diver, 2 velvet scoters, 3 godwits, 2 oyster-catchers, 4 black scoters, 2 golden-eyes,  
1 long-tailed duck, 2 pintail, 1 red-throated diver, etc.

of humours, and in return he treated me to one of his caustic tirades on the Government then in power—a lecture overflowing with dry humour and unconscious wit. He was not a prig, but only a very kindly old fellow whose brain, like that of so many of Scotland's humbler sons, was far superior to his uninteresting and odoriferous calling.

The morning's work is over, and nothing remains but to haul up the punt, count the birds, and sort out any specimens from them

that are not to go to the pot. It is now 10.30, and since daybreak I have secured twenty-five scaup, two wild-duck, one wigeon, two teal, two golden-eye, and ten plover; total forty-two head—not a bad bag for the shoulder gun on unpreserved waters!

So now we are back again at the little inn, with an appetite that twenty-three and good health need not be ashamed of, and my pipe after breakfast is sweetened with the pleasant thought that, after all, things sometimes do go exactly right with the wildfowler, and that this morning in particular is one of his red-letter days.



## CHAPTER VI

### FIELD NOTES ON THE NORTHERN FIRTHS

THE Moray Firth is certainly one of the best wildfowl resorts round the coasts of Great Britain. It not only holds throughout the winter months a full complement of the surface-feeding and diving ducks, on which both professionals and amateurs delight to exercise their skill, but it also attracts and shelters a great variety of those interesting birds which are themselves either the hangers-on or the friends and neighbours of the more profitable birds of the table. In Fort George (at that time the *depôt* of my regiment) I had for three winters a most excellent base of operations from which to watch all that went on on the sea itself and in the more sheltered bays of Campbelltown, Castle Stuart, and Inverness; and when not actually engaged in pursuit of duck (for military duties were exceedingly light) I spent most of my time strolling about with my telescope on the shore and headlands, watching the more interesting movements and ways of the waterfowl. It was here that I first observed how very differently wigeon act under the various circumstances of alarm and danger, when, exposed as they are, on these waters, to all sorts of 'alarms and excursions,' they seem to gauge with marvellous accuracy the degree of mischief to be apprehended; and in avoiding danger, or in taking a hint from other birds, they have no equals



## PART II



*Great Black-headed Gulls moving W.*





except the Brent. Amongst their enemies here (and possibly elsewhere) is the great black-backed gull (*Larus marinus*), a mischievous wretch who knows how to irritate the sportsman as well as the duck, and who will even slaughter the latter when no other food can be found. Black-backed gulls feed chiefly on small fish and other marine creatures, and when these have moved into deeper water, as they commonly do after a hard frost, the widgeon and scaup assembled on the Moray are apt to have a bad time of it.

Their plan seems to be to fly quite quietly above a resting pack, and then to dash directly down upon them. But the ducks are not to be taken quite so easily as that. The moment they see the great gulls descending they rise massed together in a string. The gulls then single out their victims, each of them endeavouring to strike one with his wings sufficiently hard to knock it into the water, and woe betide the unfortunate if he falls and tries to escape by diving, as they generally do; for his relentless pursuers, once they have him beneath the surface, never rest till he is exhausted, when they fall upon him and instantly tear him to pieces. I have several times seen a pair of great black-backs go through the whole performance with success; but, far oftener, owing either to their clumsiness or to the widgeon taking early alarm, they miss their chance. Never once did I see them seize a duck on the stoop itself, or when it has been first struck into the water; and this I think is curious, considering the quickness of their neck movements and the power of their bills.

One frosty morning in Inverness Bay I watched the great black-backs, for fully two hours, moving backwards and forwards the pack of scaup that always lives there. On the first attack one of

the gulls knocked a scaup down, but the clever diving duck was more than a match for him, and easily escaped. The gull dipped twice over the rising bird and then gave up the chase and returned to the pack, which had settled only a short distance away.

Just as in the big game districts of Africa, the weaklings are carried off by the lions, who are ever hanging on to their flanks, the northern packs of duck have the great black-backs to see that only the fittest survive. About fifty of the big gulls spend the whole year in the neighbourhood. By day they work the whole of the Cromarty, the Moray, and the Beaulie Firths, picking up all the shore-shooters' and puntsmen's cripples, and any other dead thing that comes under their acute vision, and every night they return to rest on the isolated sand-bar between Nairn and Fort George, known as Whiteness Sands. Here I occasionally attacked them, and killed a few by means of the trick described in the last chapter of this work; but after a while they got to know me and my wiles, and during 1892 not a single specimen fell to my gun, although they were most troublesome up the firth.

One summer day in 1891 I determined to assail one of their strongholds on the Cromarty Soutars—great barren cliffs and stacks standing at the northern entrance of the Cromarty Firth; but in carrying out my design I nearly came to grief myself. I started in the quartermaster's boat, with five soldiers to help me, and after a pleasant row of eleven miles we reached the base of the cliffs where I expected to find a few great black-backs breeding amongst the numerous herring gulls. A brace of peregrines were sailing about as we drew near, and now and again a rock pigeon, and

some farm pigeons which had gone wild, dashed out of the caves above the water.

Presently, after a good rest and some refreshments, I set about to discover the nests of the black-backs, which I had been led to suppose bred here in a colony, as they do in some places. But this proved to be incorrect. There were just a pair or two of the big birds nesting among the herring gulls, and as I had seen, on our first approach, one black-back leave a high isolated stack, which seemed to present no unusual difficulty, I determined to climb to the top. The first fifty feet was quite easy, then came a somewhat bad place, which after a while I succeeded in passing, and so mounted to the summit, where, amid many herring gulls, lay the nest and two eggs of the birds of which I was in search. In a few minutes these and about twenty herring gulls' eggs were stowed away in my shirt, which I had now taken off, and I prepared to



THE MOMENT TO PULL

come down again. I had to go carefully for fear of breaking my spoils, but when I came to the turn in the rock which had first barred my progress, I found it impossible to descend any further, even without my burden. Try as I would, there seemed no way to get over that six feet of rock, for it shelved inwards, and was slippery as well from recent rains. The more I looked at it the less I liked it. At last a jutting knob of turf caught my eye, and in another minute one of my toes was on it; but the wretched thing quivered and gave way, and I only just managed to draw myself up again, in a horrible fright that took me some time to get over. There was nothing for it now but to acknowledge defeat, and call for assistance from the boat, whose occupants lay below and were watching my efforts with complaisant interest. One man responded to my call, stepped ashore, and at once proceeded to scale the rock. He got up about fourteen feet and then stuck and began to swear. The next to come was my groom, a man of vast proportions and no activity. He achieved fully thirty feet from the bottom, stopped and swore. The other three men declared they knew nothing about rocks, and dared not tackle them; better go, they said, to Cromarty and get ropes and assistance. This, from my eyrie, I vetoed, as undignified and unnecessary, and insisted on all of them having a turn at the obstacle. Now, I don't profess to be a good rock climber—would rather not risk my neck in that way; but that five gallant sons of Mars should even think of succumbing to the difficulty I had surmounted gave me quite a new idea of my performance. At last one of them, taking off his heavy ammunition boots, succeeded in reaching a point within eight feet of my perch, when, by disgorging the contents of my shirt, and tying the sleeves round a projecting rock,

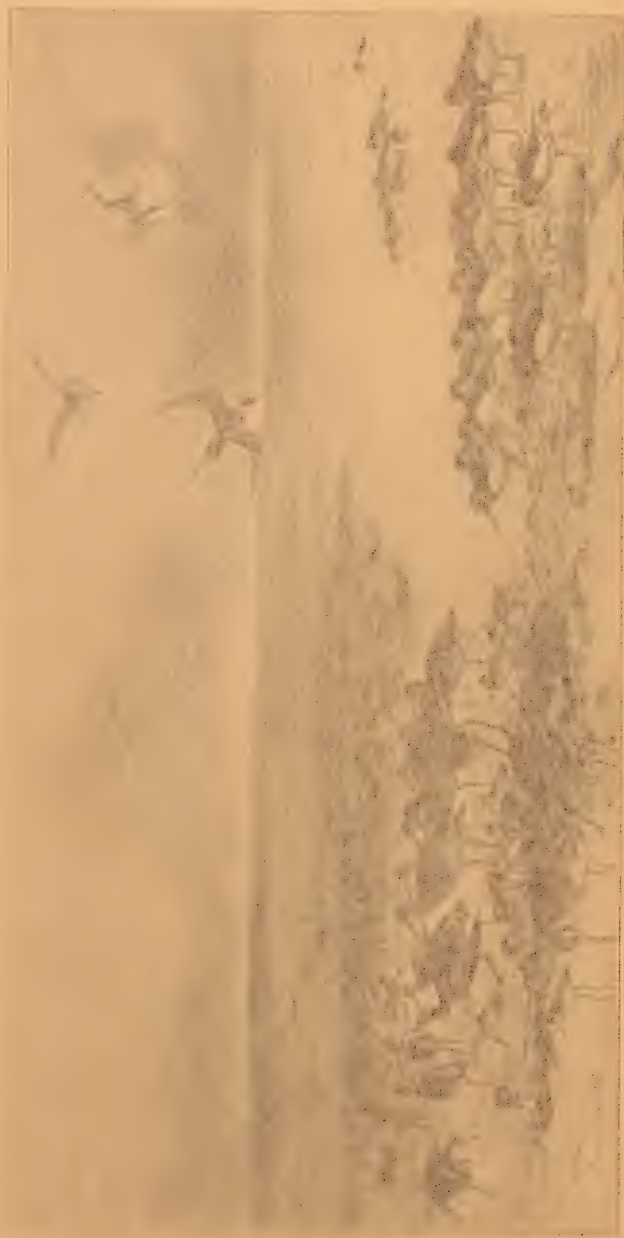






CURLEWS MOVING WIGEON.





CURLEWS MOVING WIDEON.

I managed to swing myself within his reach, and so with his help got over the only obstacle in my path. I have not been bird's-nesting on the Soutars since, and don't think I shall go up that stack again.

The Moray Firth is the only place where I have ever seen a heron actually move wigeon, and do so persistently. Herons, we know, will hardly ever sit to a punt—they have a nasty trick of flying away with a loud shriek, and will even come near the hiding-place of the gunner, squawking with all their might—and this particular heron (I am not sure that there were not two) plagued me so abominably that I could never get a shot in Campbelltown Bay if he was there. Standing high on a rock, never very far from the best wigeon ground, he could see the punt when it was still half a mile away, and at the first sign of an approach his long neck would go up, and he would let go all the swear words he knew. Then away he went to the nearest pack of wigeon, to warn them of the danger, shrieking aloud as he flapped his great wings in the air, and if that failed to make an impression, diving down as if to attack them or rushing at them, half running, half flying, as they rested on the mud.

As it was impossible to compass his destruction with the shot gun, I repeatedly tried to stalk him with the rifle; but so cunning did he become that I only once obtained a shot, and then missed. This only encouraged him in his evil habits. For aught I know, there he is still, complete master of the situation.

Birds so constantly subject to persecution as wigeon are, seem readily to recognise the alarm calls of any other species which happen to be feeding in close proximity. Curlews, especially if

slightly scattered, are most difficult to pass, and oyster-catchers are sometimes nervous, kittle, and noisy, especially before stormy weather, whilst even a single old redshank rising at a dangerous moment and sounding his noisy whistle may spoil the puntsman's best chance. Except on the north sands of the Dornoch Firth, where sheldrake are sometimes very numerous in the winter, a shot at wigeon is seldom marred by their interference; but should an odd pair of these birds be found resting ashore with a company of wigeon, there is, according to my experience, little or no chance of a shot. Like the geese, to whom they are so closely allied, sheldrake have extraordinarily good and quick sight, and when wigeon are feeding or resting near at hand they invariably disturb them, putting up their long necks the moment the punt has approached sufficiently near to be threatening. Only when paired, in February and March, do they seem to lose something of their habitual shyness, and become less troublesome, as at that time they commonly sit apart in some sheltered bay not far from the sandhills and rabbit holes where they will presently make a summer home.

Other birds whose exceptional acuteness may often destroy the puntsman's chance in Northern waters are the golden-eyes. These handsome little ducks are especially numerous in the Moray and the Beaully Firths, where they delight to dive along in search of food in the shallows outside a pack of wigeon which are 'on feed.' To the inexperienced eye they commonly look so innocent and unsuspecting, so free from all sense of danger, that a puntsman might almost hope to come up alongside of them without creating alarm; but let him try this, and the probability is that he will find out his mistake before he gets within shot. The ducks have been watching



him for some time, and are only waiting his approach within a given distance, when, after a preliminary rushing and splashing over the



CAUGHT IN A BLACK SQUALL

water, away they go, and unless the puntsman is exceptionally lucky, away go the wigeon too. The disturbance will at any rate put the latter off their feed, and send them swimming seawards.

My experience in these two firths, the Moray and the Beaul, is that, except at the beginning of the season, when all duck are fairly easy to approach, there is nothing to be done but wait and trust that the golden-eye will swim away. If you move on and disregard them you may get a shot, but it is generally a poor one.

At certain seasons golden-eye are more numerous on the Beaul Firth than anywhere else in Great Britain. A note in my

shooting journal shows that one December day in 1891 I saw over two hundred there, all in one pack. Parties of forty and fifty are not uncommon, and although not so good for food as the surface-feeding duck, they are still quite a palatable bird if properly cooked. Being essentially a true sea-duck they evince the common antipathy of the species to passing over the land; so, when found up the necks of estuaries or on inland lakes, they are not difficult to kill with shoulder guns in any narrow pass where they break away for the sea.

In such a pass, during the winter of 1891-1892, I shot over sixty golden-eyes on Loch Flemington, a small fresh-water lake situated between Fort George and the Cawdor Hills, and much frequented by these birds when the westerly gales were in full force. My plan was to drive out in the evening from the Fort to a point five miles along the Holm Rose road, where, standing up in the trap, I could see the far end of the loch. If there were golden-eye there I put up my horse at a roadside farmhouse, and my groom, who soon became an expert mover of ducks, would make a big circle round the lake and, if possible, start the birds in separate parties. They would then come flying up the lake for a narrow neck which was commanded on one side by some big grassy mounds where I lay concealed, and generally obtained a shot or two. My best evening's work gave me six, three of them being beautiful old drakes.

Ducks of a given species may be numerous in one district, and easy to get; but only the Naturalist knows how hard it is to obtain any particular specimen he may need. To prove his theory as to change of plumage at certain periods, there may be just one missing link in the chain of evidence he has already







*Golden-eyes on the wing.*





secured—one example of the species at a given age or date—and if it be golden-eye or widgeon that he wants, he may have to shoot hundreds of them before the coveted treasure is within his grasp. At last, perchance, his efforts are crowned with success, and the reddest of red-letter days is promptly emblazoned in his Diary.

Although a few pochards annually breed in Scotland, it is almost impossible to find the old drakes in their eclipse plumage. I had been trying for years to shoot some myself, to show what this bird is like at that stage of life, and on Loch Flemington I at last got what I wanted. During two visits to Loch Spynie I had seen the birds of which I was in search, and at the Loch of the Clans near Fort George I knew that they likewise bred; but as I could not get leave to hunt for them at either of these places, I turned my attention to Murthly, where two pairs only bred annually. Here, however, I was disappointed; the old males, it seemed, always left the marsh about the middle of July, so I almost despaired of finding any spot where they were to be had. One evening, however, at the end of July 1891, it occurred to me that as Loch Flemington was only about two miles away from the Loch of the Clans (the marsh on Kilravock where the pochards bred) it was quite likely that any old drakes whose wives were nesting would spend their day resting on the open waters. So, mounting my pony, I rode over to have a 'bit spy.' Yes; there they were—five of them—right in the middle of the Loch. I knew them at once by their dumpy forms and close appearance; and as they were all of the same size, and no females would be absent from their broods as yet, I concluded they must all be old males.

Leaving the pony in charge of a farm-hand, I now crept down to

some reeds commanding a view of the lake, when I found that my conclusion was correct. These were the very birds whose acquaintance I had so often longed to make. The next day was August 1, so, for fear that any other shooter might be before me, I had Hugh Smith, my puntsman, out of bed at 1 A.M., and placing the gunning punt on a cart (for there was no boat on the lake) we trudged over before daybreak. It was getting light as we launched the boat, and in a few minutes it was sufficiently clear to shoot; so, starting at once, we moved quietly along, lying down, and presently, to my great joy, I saw the five drakes in exactly the same position as I had left them the evening before. They were as quiet and unsuspicious as a flock of farmyard hens, while I was as excited as if I was lying behind a rock within fifty yards of a couple of royals. Not until we were within thirty yards of them did they make a move, and then, rising up, I got in a cross shot on the water with my 12-bore, killed three with my right barrel and another with my left, two of the birds obligingly hanging back till I could attend to them. The fifth bird circled round once and then flew right away; but having now as many specimens as I wished for I was not altogether sorry that he escaped.

Very amusing is it to watch, as I have often done, a big pack of wigeon resting for the day right out in the middle of the Moray Firth. Now and then a seal pops up in the midst of them, like a Paul Pry, with his habitual 'I hope I don't intrude,' when those nearest to him instantly get out of his way, only to settle again on the outside of the pack—evidently not so much alarmed as bored by their impertinent visitor.

Though the Greenland seal undoubtedly devours sea birds such as gulls, Brunnick's guillemot, and the little auk, which he seizes as he rises to the surface, I do not think that our common seal (*Phoca vitulina*) ever preys upon feathered creatures.

Mallard are at times very numerous in all the northern firths, yet, owing to their scattering habits, it is quite the exception to make a good shot at them in Scotland with the swivel-gun. Big shots,



SEAL DISTURBING WIGEON

of course, have been made by professional gunners, but these are extremely rare, and are, as far as I can ascertain, always obtained at night. Over fifty at a shot have been killed on the Beaulie, the Cromarty, and the Dornoch Firths; but twenty mallard are nowadays considered a very good bag for one discharge.

I shall not readily forget an occasion—the only one within my experience—when a really big shot at mallard could have been obtained, and would have been, but for a most unfortunate accident.

On still winter mornings, when the tide was suitable, flocks of duck would sometimes come floating in towards Fort George, carried along by the flowing stream; and one could then run out straight for the fort, get a shot, and be home in time for breakfast. At such times, therefore, I used to send my man, Hugh Smith, up on to the ramparts with a telescope to look out and report to me if any were in sight. One morning he came running in to say that a splendid flock were then passing Channery Point on the Fort Rose side of the Moray, and coming straight on to Fort George. There was not a moment to lose, for the duck generally woke up when they found themselves getting into the swift water that courses round the point of the fort, and then rose and flew away up to the channels opposite Munlochy and Inverness Bay. Now, but a few days previously, the striker of my big gun (an excellent weapon) had gone wrong, necessitating a visit to Birmingham, where it then was. Another punt gun, however, was found by the quartermaster, who knew no more than I did that it had been put on shore by my friend, Major Laing, because it was dangerous. Some freshly loaded cartridges, too, were forthcoming, so Hugh and I pushed off the punt and 'set' to the birds, fondly anticipating a great success. In a few minutes we were close to our quarry, which we now saw were about five hundred mallard, all asleep, and so packed together that a 12-bore would have killed a dozen. Nearer and nearer we crept, and everything seemed *couleur de rose*; there were no difficulties and no waits, and it seemed almost too easy a shot, as, peeping up along the big gun, I saw that the nearest birds were only about fifty yards away. Now was the critical moment. Aligning the gun on the densest part of the flock, I pulled the trigger string, and instantly there was









*Swans moving Wagon*



a terrific explosion. A myriad whirling stars flashed and flickered before my eyes, and with the burning sensation that followed came the horrible thought that I was blinded for life. But though stunned and stupefied with the shock, I was perfectly conscious of what had happened. The big gun had burst, and for five minutes I could see nothing of Hugh. I called to him, but he made no answer. Then, as the pain in my eyes began to subside, I discovered that his head was lying between my legs. I touched it and called to him again, when his reply, though hardly what I had expected, left



A TERRIFIC EXPLOSION FOLLOWED

no doubt that he was alive. In a paroxysm of wrath he poured forth a whole volume of imprecations on the gun, the quartermaster, and all his belongings, and I made no attempt to stop him, only too



glad to find that he was equal to so fine an exordium. A few minutes later, and I found, to my great joy, that my sight was not altogether gone. I could make out, however dimly, objects near at hand, and by the time I had got the sculls out and headed the punt for the fort, I could see pretty clearly the face of my battered companion. It was black with powder, with little rills of blood running down from cuts made by the brass from the cartridge; and mine, I felt certain, presented much the same appearance, for the brass cover, in passing, had scored my right cheek. Neither of us, however, was seriously damaged, nor were the mallard we had hoped to kill. They fled gaily away, untouched by a single pellet. And so ended what might have been a most tragic adventure.

Amongst the surface-feeding duck which frequent the coasts of Scotland, by far the rarest, as well as the shyest, are the Pintail; indeed, so rarely are they mentioned in any of the various works on Scottish Natural History that one would imagine them to be only occasional visitors in certain favoured spots. This, however, is only a superficial view, based on the collected evidence of local naturalists, who are not wildfowlers. Pintail generally contrive to keep well out of sight during the daytime; but the experienced wildfowler knows where to find them in the dreamy time of dawn or dusk, even if they escape observation in the glare of day. Many of the species frequent the Beaully every winter, and some few the Moray and the estuary of the Eden, in both of which I have shot them; but their chief home in Scotland is the Dornoch Firth in Sutherland, to which I went in December 1892 for the purpose of gathering some specimens.

At the picturesque little village, from which this Firth takes its

name, lived my friend Major Laing, a keen puntsman and the best of good fellows. Up to this date he had not shot on the Firth, being bent on doing so later on; so, whether the pintail were there or not, he could not say. We must find out; and Sunday, the day after my arrival, being a still, sunny day—the first, and (as it happened) one of the last of that stormy winter—we strolled out together to the sand hills to have a look. That duck were there was soon plain

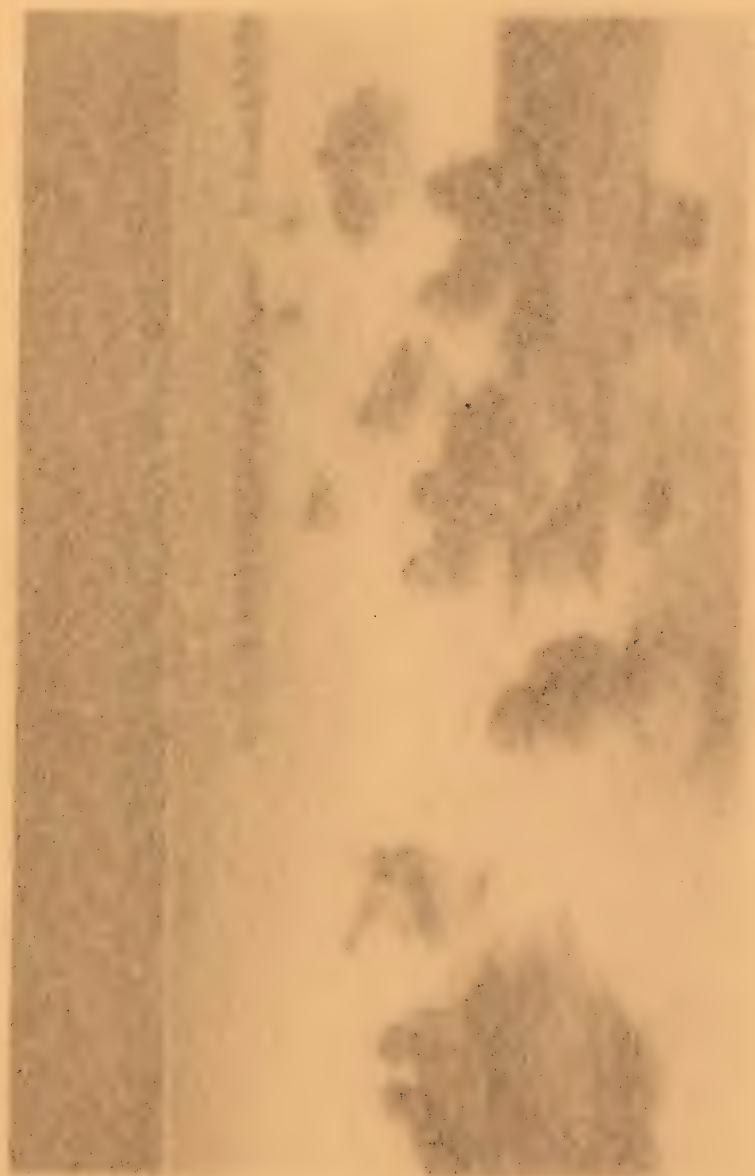


PINTAIL ALARMED BY A DISTANT SHOT

enough. The water's edge, some four hundred yards away, seemed to be marked with a continuous line of them, stretching away, almost without a break, for over a mile; and, with the aid of my glass, I saw that they were all pintail, and certainly not less than 1,100 in number—not a bad show for birds that are supposed to be rare winter visitors! The next day, and for many following ones, Hugh and I went off before daylight in pursuit of the duck, but for nearly three weeks adverse winds and cross tides combined

to spoil our sport. I got only three shots at the birds I particularly wanted, bagging, respectively, nine, five, and four of them.

In common with several other species, pintail are now extending their range in Scotland. I know of one loch where there were no less than thirteen nests last season—1899. May they increase and multiply, there and elsewhere, for the benefit of my brother sportsmen ! For myself, I am satisfied with what I have already got.



to spoil one pair. I got only three shots at the birds I particularly wanted. I saw, respectively, nine, five, and four of them.

In common with several other species, pintails are now extending their range in Scotland. I found of one loch where there were no less than upwards of 1000 in season—800. May they increase and multiply, that would be good for the benefit of my brother sportsman. For myself, I am satisfied with what I have already got.





*Feet in 'banded' and 'mottled' formation*



## CHAPTER VII

### A DAY WITH THE PUNT-GUN ON THE MORAY FIRTH

THE various military duties of the day at a regimental dépôt are not of a very serious nature, nor, as a rule, prolonged after mid-day; so, after lunch, and getting leave of absence for one night, I started off in my punt with Hugh Smith for Inverness, a distance of twelve miles by the coast-line. There was to be a dance that night in the northern town, so I sent on my clothes, and hoped to get a few duck for my friends on the journey.

From the barren sandy point on which the old fort stands to the nearest duck ground west of the village of Campbelltown, there are about three miles of sea—just a nice spin of poling to warm one on a cold winter's day before the telescope is got out and the waters ahead are carefully surveyed. To-day there is nothing to be seen except a few scattered golden-eyes, which are always here diving about in the shallows, and ready to be off when the punt approaches. A long dark line, alternately rising and disappearing on the glistening swell opposite Channery Point, far away on the other side of the Firth, shows that the Campbelltown pack have either been moved out of their feeding-ground, or don't intend to come in until a later hour; so, the winter afternoons being so short, we move on, hardly expecting to see anything before the point of Castle Stuart is reached.

There is splendid feeding-ground—that is to say, masses of the sweet sea-grass (*Zostera marina*) on which wigeon especially subsist—all the way from Campbeltown to the Castle Stuart headland, and I had quite given up hope of seeing anything worth a shot, when, on rounding into a bay of the coast, we suddenly came upon a nice bunch of wigeon well on feed. Could we have seen into this corner a moment sooner, a very nice little shot might have been had; but, as it happened, the duck, now about three hundred yards off, saw us just as we saw them, and commenced to swim out at once, but without displaying any unusual fear. As time was of some object, and the light would soon fail, I decided to ‘rush’ them at once, and chance getting a long shot, which might produce half a dozen, though if the pack had been bigger I would not have disturbed them, leaving them rather for an early visit next morning. Lying down I soon cocked and adjusted the big gun, and Hugh, with his paddles out (he always ‘paddled’ even in the shallows), made the punt move along, scraping over the sea-ware, and avoiding the stones as I signalled the line to him with my feet.

I expected the wigeon to fly at one hundred and fifty yards, as they so distinctly saw us, but still they seemed unwilling to rise: one old duck actually got up, but seeing that the rest did not follow she pitched again. At about one hundred yards all the males began whistling, and all necks were stretched for flight; so, laying the gun on the only place where the birds were at all close, I pulled the string, jerked my head to one side and looked through the smoke for results.

‘A nice shot that, Hugh,’ I said; for the cartridge was a good



SETTING TO BIRDS

one, the wad was well up to the birds, and six of them lay dead, whilst two others had dropped from the flock as they sailed away. But Hugh only gave a grunt of satisfaction, for he is a man of few words, and at the moment his mind had slipped away to a little bygone adventure on the opposite shore. Pointing to a big white stone beside the boat, and jerking his head towards the land, he said, with a significant smile, 'D'ye mind yon hare?'

Now 'yon hare' had been a source of trouble to me; I had poached it, but not intentionally, and Hugh had got the credit of the misdemeanour. The circumstances were these: One very cold winter's day in the previous year, when all the land, except the few arable fields running down to the beach, was covered with snow, Hugh and I were working along in the punt towards Castle Stuart, when my attention was arrested by a hare, running parallel to us



about one hundred yards away, and going very slowly over the black plough-land just above high-water mark. The hare seemed to be in a desperate fright; its ears were laid down, whilst it dodged and turned as if it had suddenly taken leave of its senses. A moment afterwards I caught sight of two little white creatures galloping about fifty yards behind it, and it suddenly crossed my mind that they were chasing the hare. Seizing my gun and jumping out of the punt on to the white stone previously mentioned, I ran up the shingle just in time to see the final act of the tragedy. The stoats—for such, of course, the pursuers were—were still thirty yards away from their victim, yet, curiously enough, they did not seem to see it; they cantered along constantly putting their noses down and running the scent exactly like hounds. At last, when within ten yards of the hare, they suddenly put up their necks;



CRIPPLE STOPPING

the hare stopped, sat down, and began to scream; and then one of them rushed upon it and seized it by the throat.

Without a moment's thought I fired at the murderous rascal,

and killed both stoat and hare at one shot. The other stoat now looked at me steadily for a moment, and then like lightning skipped over a high furrow and was out of sight; but I had only to



PICKING UP AFTER A SHOT.

move forward a yard or two when he too fell to my second barrel.

I had often heard of stoats and weasels hunting hares and rabbits in a small pack, but this was the only time I ever saw anything of the kind. Of course I got unmercifully chaffed about shooting stoats and other people's hares with a punt-gun (as they called it), and of course Hugh adorned the tale with many embellishments, and of course the Dalcross keepers got to hear of it, and kept a sharp eye on the erratic Hugh every time he showed his nose outside the village. The memory of this awful atrocity perchance still lives in the chronicles of that northern village, to the comfort of the 'Tammas Taggart' of to-day when disposed to preen himself on his superior virtue.

After gathering up our ducks we set to and made the old punt

fairly fizz through the water. It was dark when we reached Inverness Bay, but we knew our road well and took the boat round the Longmon ranges and up into the river, where we stowed her away safely for the night. Sing heigho then for the merry dance, 'the long carousal in the illumined hall.' A most festive affair it proved, and then, after but two hours' sleep, Hugh and I met again in the dark by the water-side, yawning prodigiously as we speculated on the chance of a shot in Inverness Bay on our way home, and never dreaming of the exciting day that was now before us. About ten minutes' paddling brought us round into the bay, where, thanks to the absence of John Robertson, the Avoch gunner, who had not been here for a week at least, great numbers of duck were evidently on the move. The wigeon were calling in all directions, and apparently all heading in to one point, where, far away below the Cameron barracks, on the outskirts of the town, I could faintly hear the chorus of many throats. As we were coming from the darkness towards the first streaks of dawn in the eastern sky I could just discern, however dimly, several small bunches of wigeon flying in and dropping on to the mud, so I knew there must be a goodly company well on feed there. And now everything was simply perfect for a successful shot. There was not a ripple, there were no banks or rocks to stop us, and the flowing tide, as it was sure to carry us up to the birds, was also certain to pack them together during the last half-hour of the feeding; so I shipped my poling oar with confidence and lay down, expecting great things, and rather encouraged than disheartened by Hugh's grumbles and bad language, for he groaned and swore dreadfully when the best chances came.

After pushing along quietly for a few hundred yards, and





BEFORE THE SHOT.



## A Day with the Pump-gun on the M. 100

straining my eyes to find the pack. I saw that pack at least a hundred yards ahead and well up on the bank, and I saw a dark line, which I at first took to be a line of trees, but on sight of the quick movements of some of the birds, I saw that as about forty wigeon came rustling down the bank, I saw a line of welcome from the assembled pack.

not weeds at all,

but all wigeon

in serried bands

of perhaps three

thousand and all

well on their feet

striking

thing. I saw

them. I saw

in my mind

hundred and

the chance was

puntsman. I

longed for a shot, but I saw that the birds were not yet

before? Was some other bird, or was it a wigeon, or was it

another species of wigeon, or was it a wigeon, or was it

did not shoot. I saw that the birds were not yet

flowing tide. The birds were not yet

shore and we were not yet

shot would be a shot, but I saw that the birds were not yet

and got within a hundred yards of the birds, and I saw

this point the birds were not yet





straining my eyes to find the pack, I at last made out, about two hundred yards ahead and well up on the edge of the tide, a long dark line, which I at first took to be weeds. Presently I caught sight of the quick movements of ducks' heads raised and lowered as about forty wigeon came rushing up and pitched amidst a chorus of welcome from the assembled pack. The dark line of weeds were not weeds at all, but all wigeon in serried bands of perhaps three thousand, and all well on feed and suspecting nothing. It was a chance I had seen in my dreams a hundred times—the chance every puntsman has



STRANDED BY THE EBB

longed for—just one really big shot! Was it to be a failure, as oft before? Was some trifling incident to spoil all? We shall see. In another second all was intense excitement. We grounded; but this did not alarm me; I knew it meant nothing with such a swiftly flowing tide. Taking a spare rod I assisted Hugh to back off shore and we were soon afloat again; and, seeing that the best shot would be from a point a little to the east, we angled across and got within one hundred and fifty yards of our quarry. From this point the duck looked absolutely solid, and I knew that if the

water would carry us another fifty yards I should probably kill one hundred birds.

But it was not to be. Just at this moment there broke upon the deathlike stillness a loud rattle of stones with reiterated cries of 'Whoa, mun!' and 'Staand, mun!' To my horror, looming big in the darkness, there came directly behind the wigeon, and not one hundred yards from them, a horse and cart full of sea-weed, and the horse, taking no notice of his master's call, kept straight on to the mud and *directly in my line of fire*. Was ever such luck? As I could not shoot without hitting the horse there was nothing for it but to back instantly and try another angle. But here again we were foiled in our intent. While shoving away as hard as we could the horse walked on with the cart quite unconcernedly to the water's edge, within sixty yards of the wigeon, who now rose with the roar of three thousand pairs of wings. I could have cried with vexation at this wreck of all my hopes. In the whole of Inverness-shire there was probably only one cart gathering sea-weed at that unearthly hour; and that it should be at this one particular spot, to spoil the best chance of this or many seasons, was hard indeed.

As the mass of wigeon lifted and came out to sea they did not see us. A small corner of the flock detached itself and settled quietly amongst some floating weed about two hundred yards to our left; but, chafing under my bitter disappointment, I hardly noticed them. 'There! worth a shot there,' whispered Hugh, pointing to these birds, whereupon mechanically and half-heartedly, and never expecting that they would allow us to move without taking alarm, we quietly swung the boat round inch by inch and then ran up to within one hundred yards of our birds, which I now saw numbered

nearly a couple of hundred. At this distance one of them rose, so I let drive, and had the satisfaction of seeing the shot rake out a small lane through the midst of the flock. Hugh was immediately up on his knees and running the punt up to the fallen—seventeen dead birds and five cripples, three of which, being only wing-tipped, gave us a bit of a hunt before we secured them. It was a fairly good shot, and at any other time we should have been well content



SAILING HOME

with it, but in the light of what we had lost our gain was comparatively small.

We now rested for a few minutes, stowed away our game in the boat, and, under the soothing influence of a pipe, took a good spy ahead up to Culloden, to see if our shot had moved everything out of the bay. No; the main body of the wigeon was still there—right out in the middle of the channel—but to attack them there would scare them too much, sending them clean away out to sea;



and as the professional puntsmen never shot at birds at rest, then it would hardly be fair to them that I should do so. So we passed on, not without hope that our virtue might be rewarded at another time.

During the next three miles nothing was seen except a few golden plover and an odd pair of mallard sitting on the weeds near Culloden station. Then, as we came near the Castle Stuart village, I saw ahead a goodly bunch of duck near the shore, which on closer inspection proved to be the pack of scaup which always dwell in Inverness Bay. They were all on feed, diving half a company at a time, and offered a good chance, since no widgeon were to be seen this side of Castle Stuart. Being so seldom attacked it seemed probable that they would stand a close approach; yet as soon as we were within fair shooting distance they put up their heads, strung out into an exasperatingly wide formation, and commenced to swim away.

Now, when scaup really begin to swim a man propelling a double punt has little chance of keeping up with them; but being quite up to their little tricks we edged outside of the pack, making them head towards the shore, when they at once 'bunched' and refused to be driven. This was all right for us—exactly what I expected—and I got the shot off just when the flock were rising. After the smoke cleared away a surprising number of heads still showed up; five scaup lay breast upwards, and six more were wounded, but swimming, so we set to work to bag all we could in the shortest possible time, mindful of the endless trouble which wounded scaup or other diving duck can give if once allowed to scatter. The best thing to do, I find, is to get outside them, try

to herd them together, and make sure of your first shot. This is not easy, but with a smart and experienced man behind you, and quick shooting, hardly any ought to be lost in calm waters. The



THE PUNTSMAN'S SCAVENGERS

all-important thing is to prevent them from making their first dive, especially if there is any breeze on. In this case, as the day was so still, I got a brace of slightly winged ones with my first two shots before the others commenced diving. Then another fell to my

R

gun, but the other three, diving under the boat and coming up seaward, gave us a bit of a hunt, ending in my securing only two of them, the third disappearing after a long back chase. Thus, after much pulling, banging, and turning, we had ten out of our eleven scaup, all old birds.

A point that has always struck me as curious in the study of duck distribution is why some firths should be frequented only by immatures of one of the diving species, whilst in another only a few miles away only adults of the same species are to be found. The surface-feeders seem to mix indiscriminately throughout the winter; but take scaup, long-tailed duck, eiders, and velvet scoters, and look at their winter distribution in Scotland. Scaup adults are found in flocks in the Orkneys, the Dornoch Firth, the Moray Firth, the Tay estuary at the Lucky Scaup, where immatures are quite uncommon, whilst in the Eden estuary and away south hardly anything but immatures are seen. In the Orkneys, too, one rarely sees immatures of the long-tailed duck, nor amongst the great numbers that frequent the coast between Golspie and Dornoch, whilst up the Dornoch Firth itself there is always a big flock of immatures, as also in the Moray by Fort George, where I have never seen an adult long-tail. And again, further south, off Buddon Ness sands, on the Tay, I have seen hundreds of adults and hardly ever an immature, whilst down on the Eden and the estuary of the Forth immatures are, as a rule, the only representatives of the species. It would seem, therefore, that with all the diving species there are regular beats for adults, and other retreats for those which have not reached maturity, and that it is only a few stragglers that pass into the ranks of those of another age. As ducks are not quarrelsome creatures, it is



AFTER THE SHOT







AFTER THE SHOT.



somewhat difficult to explain this habit, and the more so as it is not to be found in the same degree amongst those duck which gain their living above the surface of the water.

We were a bit too late for the tide in Castle Stuart Bay, but, as the weather was so inviting, and there had been no one along the shore, a good pack of brent, with about sixty wigeon tacking on to their skirts, were resting comfortably above their feeding-ground, which had just been covered. The brent, wildest of all fowl, offered only a very remote chance, as they were not on feed, and had already been much



A NIGHT SHOT

hustled this season, so I had little hope of assailing them. Only twice when they first arrived in October had we pulled trigger on them, getting thirteen and nine respectively, after which we had no chance, though we set to them something like twenty times. Still one can never tell what may happen in pursuit of sport; it was just possible that these particular brent might oblige us with an interview, and even if they moved off the wigeon might for once decline to follow suit. So, changing the B. B. cartridges for one with buck shot, we lay down and half paddled and half drifted

towards the black and white fellows. At two hundred yards one old-timer woke up and began 'honking' and swimming about uneasily; we got another fifty yards nearer, and all necks were up, and the next moment, with much flapping and commotion, the geese were off for Channery Point and away out to sea or the Whiteness Sands. The wigeon, however, showed less uneasiness. After a moment or two of indecision they settled down again, and a few minutes later, though not very close in, I decided to take the shot as soon as they showed signs of a move. To my surprise they let us get well up, and the shot took eight outright, wounding only two others, both of which I secured without trouble.

We had now done well; the punt was handsomely furnished with duck, and as only Campbelltown Bay lay between us and our destination, and the tide was now nearly full, I did not expect to obtain another shot before reaching the fort. Not very far from the village of Campbelltown, however, we spied a nice little bunch of some thirty mallard all asleep, and as quiet and comfortable as the puntsman likes to see them.

They were lying off shore about two hundred yards, so masking the big gun with sea-weed, and wriggling cautiously in and out of the big weed-covered stones, we crept up to our quarry as stealthily as a snow leopard after poli.



UNLOADING

The point opposite to the birds was at length reached, and we then ran out upon them, when first an old duck and then an old drake woke up, and, hearing the click of the pole on a stone, looked about. In the moment of their indecision we ran the boat still closer to them. I aligned the gun and pulled the trigger as they were opening their wings, and making sure that at least eight or ten would fall, when click—bang—a hang-fire and a bad one—yet four of the duck remained, two of them lively movers too, as we presently found. One of these (an old bird up to all manner of tricks) dived straight away, and took us nearly a quarter of a mile back before offering a chance; then down she went again like a flash, proving almost as bad to get as a winged velvet scoter; but a slight breeze had now sprung up, and turning presently out of the ripple into the still water she showed up once more, and I secured her with a long shot.

Thus ended a most delightful morning's work. Nothing very great, but to have got shots in all three bays was very unusual, and though the shot of the season (for the Moray at least) had been spoilt, we had not done so badly after all. Since the morning broke we had got in four shots thirty-two widgeon, ten scaup, and four mallard. But, oh! what might it not have been? 'Tis ever thus with the fowler.



## CHAPTER VIII

### ON SHOOTING UNDER CANVAS, AND SOME REMINISCENCES OF THE ORKNEYS

My brother Geoff and I were born rovers. As far back as I can remember our greatest desire was to see the world and collect specimens of all the wild things we came across, and at the mature ages of twelve and thirteen respectively we were happily enabled to make a start. Ten pounds, the sum total of our resources, would not carry us very far afield (we knew that and lamented it), but we could at least explore the Northern Isles—a *terra incognita* to us - and at last we decided to go there in search of sea-fowl, of which I had already begun to make a collection.

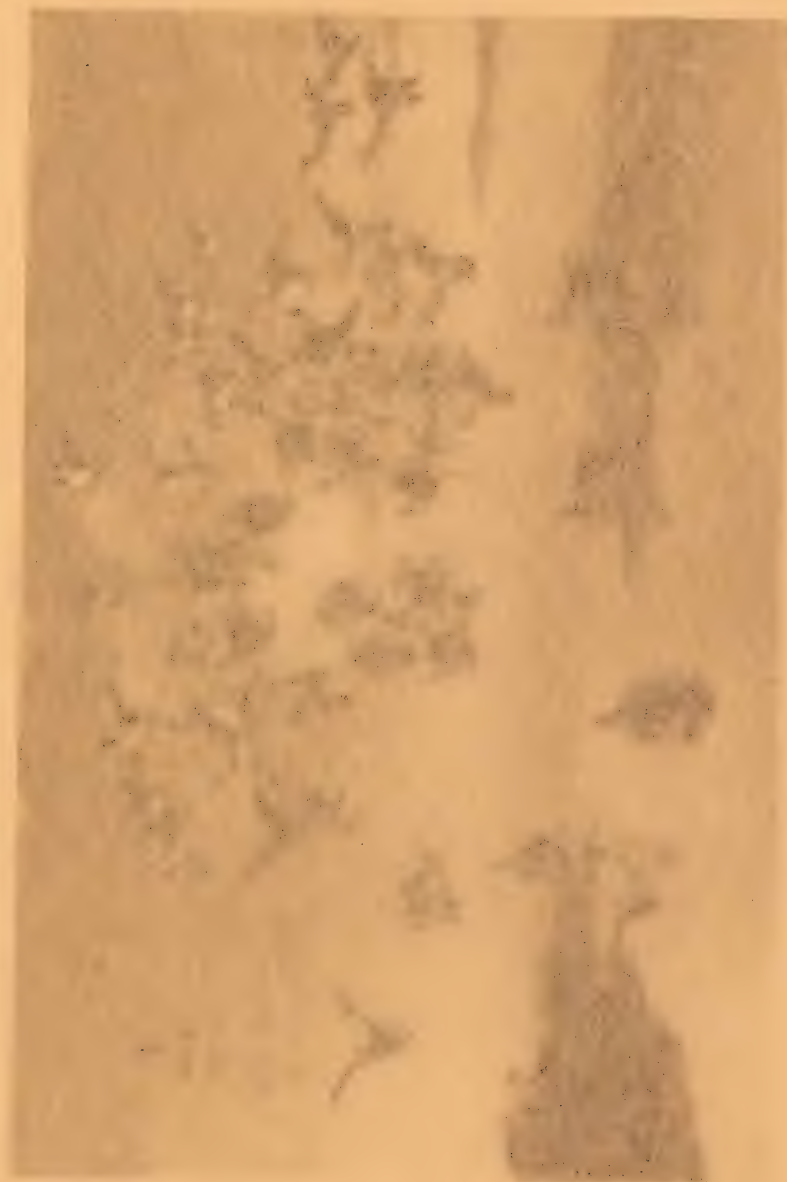
It was in the depth of winter when we started, making first for Kirkwall, in the Orkney Islands, but on landing there we found that Stromness and the western end of Pomona offered much better sport. Stromness, quite a pleasant walk on a fine day, they said, was only fourteen miles away by road; but the sea-shore had more attractions for us, and selecting that route we strolled cheerily along, regardless of falling snow and the heavy clouds that told of more to come. At last, in a blinding storm, we lost our way, and it was only after a walk of twenty-five miles that, weary and drenched to the skin, we pulled up at a little inn in the bay of Finstown, from where next morning we made our

way to the picturesque village of Stone Piers. Here I found that one James Sutherland, a bootmaker by trade, had the best local reputation as a seafarer and an ornithologist, so I quickly made his acquaintance and agreed that he should take us out in his boat for the two following days. The next day was pretty calm, with a good sailing wind, and as the weather had of late been exceedingly rough we found a good many different kinds of birds in the Bay of Ireland and about the Clestron Skerries. With my first five cartridges I killed a shag, a ringed variety of the common guillemot, a black guillemot, and a little auk. That was a good start, for I had never before shot any of these birds, and later on I was lucky enough to secure many other equally desirable from my point of view as a collector. Our visit to these wind-swept islands, however, soon came to an end, but we got so much enjoyment out of it that I determined to come again and again until I had obtained specimens of all the native birds. So I afterwards spent eight winters there, besides making many additional visits in the spring and summer seasons.

Now let me say a few words about my sailors—Jimmy Sutherland and his trusty henchman, Tom Sinclair, who were afterwards my faithful friends and companions during my subsequent cruises in the northern seas. James Sutherland was certainly one of the three best men I have ever met. Though born in a somewhat humble station of life he was gifted, like so many of the northern Scotsmen and the Scandinavians, with the appearance as well as the manners of a gentleman. He was, moreover, a man of exceptional sweetness of disposition and nobility of character, and being well educated he could hold his own in conversation on almost any subject, thanks mainly to the knowledge he had gained

by a wide course of reading. In appearance he was a viking, six feet three inches in his stockings, straight as an arrow, with a fifty-inch chest and the laughing blue eyes of the Scandinavian, and at sixty years he possessed all the vitality of a man in his prime. His delight was natural history and the pursuit of wildfowl, in both of which we found a common bond of interest. One little incident I should like to mention in proof of the man's unselfish nature. On my third visit to Stromness, in the winter of 1880, the Islands were beset by fearful weather, and our roving in the boat had been limited to but four excursions in three weeks. The rest of the time I had perforce to spend my days crouching behind the stone wall at the Bridge of Waithe, roaming round the shores, or lying under cover of the rocks waiting for birds to pass. Jimmy liked to come with me, and was out almost every day during this time, so on the evening before I departed I slipped three pounds into his unwilling hand ; but I found it no easy matter to get him to retain this remuneration, so strongly did he insist that he had done nothing for it, and that such a reward was out of all proportion to his services. This was untrue, as after all it was only the ordinary pay of a coast fisherman, and less than what he would have earned at his trade.

Next morning the steamer was to leave at the ghastly hour of 4 A.M., and as the small boat was shoving off from the pier there was a sudden clatter of feet on the icy dock stairs. 'Some one late,' said the purser, as he directed the sailors to hold hard. In another moment a big figure without a hat loomed up on the quay steps, flung a piece of paper into the boat, crying, 'A canna tak' it, Mr. Millais, a've din naethin for it,' and vanished as quickly as it came. The paper contained two sovereigns, returned by poor









*A flying shot with the punt gun.*



old Jimmy, to whom they had apparently given a sleepless night. Some of my readers, whose acquaintance with Scotland is limited to the ordinary tourist routes, may be inclined to disbelieve this little story, but it is perfectly true all the same.

Tom Sinclair was another most excellent fellow, madly keen upon the sport, and the quickest and most reliable man about a boat that could anywhere be found. His eyesight was extraordinary, and his never-failing cheerfulness of disposition greatly enhanced the pleasure of sailing with him. He had a great love and respect for his master, in whose shop he assisted, and they worked a boat together in a manner that I have not seen equalled south of the Pentland Skerries. As a rule Scotch fishermen on the east coast, though somewhat dour in manner, are trustworthy and brave, whilst those of the west coast are frequently unreliable and often avaricious; but the seamen of the Orkneys and the Shetlands are amongst the best and bravest in the world. You have only to go for a day's seal-hunting—a sport that tests the skill of the boat's crew to the highest extent—to know which are the masters of their craft as well as the pleasantest and most trustworthy fellows.

A great delight it always was to me to land on what many would call those uninteresting and barren shores, to feel dear old Jimmy's welcome clasp of the hand, and to roam for weeks amidst those lovely isles of the Northern Sea. In the spring the variety of birds was great, and how blue were the sparkling waters, and how green the cliffs of Hoy and Pomona! Finer scenery may doubtless be found elsewhere, but to me there was charm about these so-called solitudes, and the men who inhabit them, that more than compensated for the lack of other attractions. There was always

something to please the eye, or some rare bird difficult to capture, even when we had got as many specimens as we wished of other species. It took me nearly seven years to collect an almost complete series of eiders, and even then I lacked an example of the two-year-old at a certain stage of life and old drakes in eclipse plumage; but since that time North Uist has given me both of these. Four years was I in pursuit of long-tailed ducks in full summer plumage, capturing them at last, along with birds of many other species, after tremendous hunts by the Black Crag Skerries and in the Bay of Ireland and Loch Stenness. 'Chaque âge a ses plaisirs,' but I always think those were the best times I ever had as a sportsman and a naturalist.

Now let not the reader run away with the idea that the true sea-ducks (that is to say, those few species that live on the sea and never go to streams and inland waters except in the breeding season) have any value from the culinary point of view. Except the eider, and that only in the hands of a most skilful cook, they are all quite unfit for the table, and consequently come only into the category of birds of the chase, or birds that may be fairly killed in the cause of science, on account of their beauty or rarity, as natural history specimens. This, too, I would urge: that when once the object is attained there is absolutely no excuse for any further killing. These true sea-ducks are by no means easily obtained, even by the experienced fowler; one has to tackle them in quite a different manner from other sea birds; and this in itself offers an additional charm to their pursuit. A jumping boat rushing through the sea sometimes at seven or eight miles an hour, a string of slow-rising ducks, now within sight and now disappearing as your insecure

perch rises or sinks, will test the skill of the best and quickest shooter in existence, for it is snap shooting in the purest sense of the word, and to select rapidly the right birds, to kill them neatly, is not an easy feat. You get your chance too, perhaps, at most only once in the week, and then how much depends on those two cartridges. On a perfectly quiet day, with a smooth sea and a breeze just enough to enable you to run up and make the ducks fly, there is no rocking, no hanging on to your seat, and seldom that tiresome jibing of the sheet that interrupts your view of the birds. The task of the shooter is then fairly easy, but in a whole winter only very rarely does such a day occur. In the Orkneys and Shetlands, which are the best grounds for these sea-ducks, my experience is that it is always blowing a bit. There is generally a fair 'lift' on, and sometimes a considerable sea even about the inner islands, where most creatures frequent the broken waters of the Skerries, so the shooter who wants to kill specimens of the rarer sea-ducks must learn to get accustomed to the ocean 'jabble,' and both cling to his seat and swing his body in proper seaman fashion before he can shoot well.

As to the best boat for this chase, my own craft, of which I give a photograph, was perhaps as good as any. The dimensions I have not at hand, but a distinctive feature was her breadth of beam, being especially constructed to meet the heavy seas which one is often obliged to encounter. Our crew here consists of Jimmy, at the helm, Tom, standing by, ready with the 'scooner,' or landing net, myself, and dear old 'Jet,' trying to look as if she was extremely useful, but in reality about as indispensable on these occasions as a bull in a china shop.



And now, if the reader will follow me, I will show him how we used to kill our sea-ducks. Starting with a good breeze from Jimmy's landing, we soon clear the picturesque little harbour of Stromness, and run out into the 'Bring,' the great sea channel, three miles broad, between Hoy and Pomona. Here a heavy tide always runs one way or the other, making a good 'lift' in almost any kind of wind. This channel is very deep and treacherous, but always full of fish, and as we pass away to the Island of Graemsay the shags and black guillemots keep rising singly in every direction, and in half an hour we are off the Graemsay Lighthouse, where two tides meet over some jagged skerries, a rough place at times, and always a favourite feeding-ground for eiders and longtails. Here Tom and I stand up, watching intently ahead and to the flank for the sign of that splash of white floating amongst the green waves which we know to be the back or head of the cock eider or longtail drake. Presently some birds are seen three hundred yards ahead. Their white backs and heads might mean gulls. But no; there are no long wings, no white and elevated tail. It is surely a cock longtail; and are not those the rest of the flock just beyond him, which till now have been under water? We are running across the wind, so I direct Jimmy to hold the boat up a bit, which brings us several points more into the wind, that we may reach a line from which it is possible to sail 'dead' down on to the birds. The object of this—the advantage I find in sailing dead down the wind on all sea-ducks—is that when the birds rise and do not pass on the side of the boat at which you expect them, you may quickly change to the other side, and still get your shot. This can only be accomplished, however, when the men at the tiller and the sheet work properly together and swing







A WOUNDED MALLARD.





the sail over. To do this exactly at the right moment in a good breeze requires no little skill, and at this the Orkney men are capital hands.

So, 'Steady; that will do,' I say as the boat comes round again and we each take our places for the shot. First of all Tom takes in two reefs from the sail close to the mast. This gives one free shooting room on either side of the mast, and enables me to duck quickly under the sail at the critical moment, in case a 'jibe' is necessary. Then Tom leaves me with my two guns, an 8-bore and a full-choke 12, in possession of the front thwart, behind which I crouch while he himself retires to assist with the sheet or to stand by with the landing net. Jimmy, of course, steers.

At one hundred and fifty yards I pick up the 8-bore; for since the duck always rise slowly and head to wind they will come to within eighty or ninety yards, and give a long shot before passing or swinging away. At one hundred and twenty yards I am certain of a still nearer shot with the same weapon, and at one hundred yards, if the breeze is strong and they have not risen, I quickly drop the 8-bore and pick up the 12. Unless they have been unduly scared the heavy sea-duck generally rise and fly towards the boat when it is still at about seventy or eighty yards' distance. This gives a chance to the shooter at from thirty to fifty yards, sometimes very much closer. We will say, in this case, that the longtails have risen at one hundred yards, and I have seen that, contrary to my expectations, they are going to pass on the sail-side, and will soon be completely hidden from view. 'Jibe' is then the order of the day. Immediately the boat turns with the wind, and over comes the sail as you duck your head, reverse your balance, and prepare for a quick shot.

In this sport it is more important to kill your birds stone dead

than in any other form of game shooting, as in a rough sea, even if severely wounded, longtailed ducks, eiders, and scoters will generally escape, however skilful the gunner. A winged bird down must be killed at once, otherwise he is generally lost, and were it not for the habitual hesitation on the part of these ducks in making their first dive after being wounded, none of the crippled ones would be gathered at all. Of course I am only speaking of shooting in the normal northern-sea weather. On quiet days cripples are as often gathered as lost; but these true sea rovers are at all times far more difficult to bag than golden-eye or scaup, and even these are bad enough on occasion.

The happiest conditions for this sort of shooting are what I have already described—a calm sea and just sufficient wind to overtake the ducks that are swimming rapidly away from you. Then silence is absolutely necessary—no gear must be moved in the boat nor any order issued except by hand-signals.

I estimate that it takes a Naturalist, who is a fair shot and keen on collecting, about fifteen years to form a complete collection of British sea-birds. By complete, I mean four or five specimens of every bird that either comes to these islands regularly or is indigenous to the place. There are a few stragglers which he may have the luck to come across if working unremittingly in their most likely haunts, but these are only problematical, and will have to be purchased or received in exchange if he wishes to add them to his collection.

On several occasions the Orkneys have been visited by one or two of these very rare stragglers, the food in the surrounding waters and the geographical position of the islands being in themselves most attractive to sea-ducks.

The surf-scoter (*Edemia perspicillata*) is one of these rarities—a bird whose home is in the Arctic regions of the North-West Atlantic. Several have been shot in our islands (principally in the Orkneys), all about the same place. Jimmy Sutherland, who had himself been in at the death of two of them, used to dilate at length on his discovery of the birds and their subsequent capture by Mr. Pike and the Rev. Mr. Walker, who had also seen others of the species, but found them unapproachable.

These surf-scoters, it seems, always arrived in October or the beginning of November, in company with the flocks of velvet scoters which annually take up their winter residence in the channels between the Islands of Flotta and Faira, or Flotta and Hoy. It was always my hope, therefore, that one day I should be lucky enough to find some of them, and with that view I made many a rough sail and long beat home against wind and tide in my journeys across the Brigs. But never has the surf-scoter been seen again since Mr. Walker shot his specimen.

James Begg, an old stonemason in Stromness, who had shot much and knew the birds of the Orkneys well, told me that twice during his life the Sclavonian Grebes had been blocked by headwinds at the period of their spring migration, and that he had once shot a specimen in full summer plumage. These birds, which are regular but scarce winter visitors, leave our waters, as a rule, about the end of March, and, joining others, trek north in big parties to their breeding stations in Iceland. Now, as what had happened once would probably occur again, I felt pretty sure that some day I should get a chance at them. The longtailed ducks, too, would perhaps oblige me by staying late enough for me to get good specimens in their

summer plumage, and in this hope I was not disappointed. Heavy storms from the north occurred in the spring of 1885, and one morning (a fortnight before I was going up for an examination, by the way,) I received a wire from Jimmy—'Flock of grebes here. Longtails also stopping.' The temptation was too great to resist; so the same night I left London. Two days later Jimmy was delighted to see me in Stromness, where he assured me he had seen a big flock of some kind of grebe, two of them with dark necks, off Reisa Little. Next day the clerk of the weather was kindness itself, and supplied us with one of his remnant days left over from the previous summer. A glorious morning, and the prospect of a good day's sport, put us in high spirits, and after a three hours' sail we reached Reisa Little, and proceeded to circumnavigate the island. But no grebe were there. Then I thought I would try the lovely bay of Lywra Burn, a long stretch of water, whose golden sands cut right into the Hoy Hills. Yes; there was a flock of some species of strange birds, though what they were I could not make out. We must get in nearer and see. When still two hundred yards away they seemed terribly shy, and as they rose I saw at once they were the Slavonian Grebes. All except two seemed to be in the white plumage of winter, and of these two, one was in his full summer suit, and the other in the half-way stage of change. A great prize this first one, if I could only secure him—the very bird I wanted—so I followed the direction of the flock till my eyes ached; but they only flew about five hundred yards up to the head of the bay, and pitched again. This time we had them in a better position, and the wind here being lighter the boat did not frighten them so much. At about one hundred and twenty yards they rose again, and flying with

rapidly beating pinions close to the water, they passed across my left at about ninety yards, when I fired. Now the pattern of the 8-bore is such that, assuming the correct handling of the gun, the chances of a small bird at that distance being either killed or missed are about equally balanced ; so I was a bit nervous as to the result of my shot. The dark one came last of all, and as the shot reached him I had the satisfaction of seeing him turn a somersault and fall dead upon the water, the victim of only one of the No. 1 pellets that had struck him under the wing. He was a perfect specimen in full summer plumage, equal to any I afterwards obtained in Iceland. We now tried the flock again, hoping perchance to get the half-changed bird. They had pitched near Reisa Little now, and Tom had kept his eye upon them ; but by no manœuvring could we get within two hundred yards of them again.



SEA-GOING SHOOTING BOAT USED BY THE AUTHOR FOR SEVEN WINTERS IN THE ORKNEY ISLES

During the next day, and for some days afterwards, we had lovely weather. After exploring all the coasts we found at least twenty other Sclavonians scattered about in different bays. Some



of them were a little tamer than the big flock first seen, and altogether I secured eight of them (four being in full summer dress)—six with the 8-bore and two with the 12-bore. Luckily, at this season, nearly all divers fly instead of dive when suddenly alarmed, or their capture would be extremely difficult. Shy, too, as these grebes are—extremely shy when changing their raiment—they are not nearly so hard to get a shot at as the longtailed duck, who, as soon as they have assumed their beautiful summer plumage, evince a desire to be up and moving almost as soon as they see a boat. This was their condition now, and a most trying time they gave me; but, in the end, I secured six, four of which (grand old males) I inveigled by towing my fowling punt out to the Clestron bay and then hand paddling onwards in the smaller boat.

Another bird that I was always hoping to see was the King Eider, and at last I found one. Just off the old churchyard, at the extreme western point of Pomona, where the brawling Bring enters the Atlantic with a tidal rush of eight miles an hour, there forms a great chaos of tumbling and roaring water, in which no small boat can live—altogether the worst place I know of round the British coasts. Here, in the spring of 1883, I noticed some eiders on feed, and amongst them a strange bird, whose acquaintance I must hasten to make. Without loss of time, then, Jimmy and I launched our boat and proceeded to creep along the edge of the tidal race, since even in a breeze it was just possible, by tacking across and across the side eddy, to work right away out to sea as far as the point known as the Black Skerries. This we managed to achieve, but further progress was impossible, as thundering breakers were in front and on two sides of us, and none but the most highly-skilled boatmen could

have worked their way down to the Skerries and back. We were now, however, near enough to the duck to distinguish this interesting stranger, and I saw at once that he was an immature drake king eider—the curious shape of his head, the colour of the head and back, and the short breast shield being unmistakable. We were down wind, and it was next to impossible to get to windward of him without tacking to the edge of the tidal race, where there was an immense sea on; so there was nothing for it but to turn back and tack close in to the birds themselves. This made them uneasy, and, at last, after swimming out for some distance, they took to wing; and, to my intense chagrin, flew straight away.

That night it began to blow a bit, and the wind increasing in force I had for the next three days to content myself as best I could with watching its effect on sea and shore. On the fourth morning there was still a nasty sea on—too rough, said Jimmy, to think of going out—but, wandering along the quay, I happened to come across a man whose occupation compelled him to face the elements, and who now and then gave me news of any birds on his beat. It was M., the village drunkard, a lobster catcher by trade, who was at the moment getting his boat out to haul in some creels that he had set near the churchyard. A good fellow was he when sober (which did not often happen), and the only man besides Jimmy who would face the Churchyard Rocks when there was any sea on. We could not possibly get down to the Black Skerries, he said, but on my pressing him he agreed to try, and we got there with no worse result than a thorough soaking, to which we were both pretty well accustomed.

We found the flock of eiders sheltering on the land side of

the Skerries—an unusual place for them, and one where, by judicious management, it was just possible to attack them. They were feeding, and after allowing us to get to windward and pass them—a privilege that I had hardly dared to hope for—I felt that the great opportunity had come at last. We soon swung round to run down on the game, and I was trying to make my position as firm as possible for shooting, when a wretched shag, that I had not noticed before, suddenly popped up about thirty yards from the eiders and right in the line. The eiders had now stopped feeding, and were getting suspicious, so I dared not wait and allow the shag to get out of the way, but held on. At one hundred yards, up got the shag, and up got the eiders too, the king eider amongst them. The strong wind that was blowing enabled them to swing away at once, and a wild long shot at the king eider, at about one hundred and twenty yards, did no harm, for there was such a ‘jabble’ on that I could hardly sit on the thwart, and I am not at all sure that I should have hit him if he had come near. At any rate, I never saw the bird again.

There are always certain spots on the earth’s surface whose memory holds, to the traveller and lover of nature, some peculiar fascination. It is sufficient that one discovered it oneself, which fact alone gives a certain sense of jealous possession—for others it does not yet exist; and there is great truth in what some writer has said, that the finest landscapes in the world are not those which guide-books tell us to go and see.

It may be some glorious cascade, fresh from the eternal snows, where the thunder of Nature is unmarred by the discordant yells of quarrelling hackmen; or some smiling valley where the peasants

welcome one with the freshness of unspoilt natures which thirst not for the ceaseless 'tip.'

For me the old churchyard at the extreme western point of Pomona, near which we saw the king eider, had always a great attraction. The view from the promontory itself, looking to the south-west, is a remarkable one, embracing, as it does, all the elements of great landscape.

In the foreground stands the old ruined church—a jumbled pile of water-worn stones covered with grey lichens, whilst round about, amidst the rank sea-grass and thistles, rise the gravestones, in absolute confusion and neglect—stones whose inscriptions date back to early seventeenth century. It is a God's-acre, neglected and forgotten, where the thundering surges sing their never-ceasing lullaby to the gallant hearts that are stilled for ever. Here, half-effaced, homely unlettered verses tell in pathetic language how Scotland has given her best and bravest to the wintry seas; for the Orkneys, above all our islands, can echo the voice of the poet:

If blood be the price of Admiralty,  
Lord God, we ha' paid in full!

Round the graveyard is a rough stone wall of great grey stones, covered with green mosses, and broken in places by equinoctial gales. Through these gaps we see the lifting, smoking seas, breaking unceasingly on the jagged reef known as the Churchyard Rocks. Even in the calmest weather there is a sea 'on' here. For at this point the heavy ebb-tide of the Bring here meets the rush of the great Atlantic breakers and all the pent forces of wind, wave, and tide seem to join in one gigantic struggle for mastery.

On clear days, over this seething, roaring mass one can watch the irresistible force of the great tidal race rushing out to sea, boiling and wrestling in its mad career as it turns south-westward toward the emerald hills of Hoy.

Standing up above the horizon are the great cliffs of the Black Crag and the isolated pinnacle of the 'Old Man.' These form a magnificent background to the mad turmoil of the middle distance, which is in turn an admirable foil to the old-world peace of the romantic foreground.

The great black-backed gull (*Larus marinus*) is a common enough bird, but to obtain specimens in every stage of life is no easy matter, as I found during my Orkney visits, when I spent a great deal of time to this end. Its full plumage at maturity is only attained after several years of change, and I rather think I was the first to obtain a quite perfect series illustrative of every period of change; for the British Museum, when preparing their official catalogue, were good enough to pay me the compliment of asking for the loan of my specimens, from which descriptions were taken.

Adults or immatures of the first year are quite easy to get. If not much disturbed they can either be sailed up to on the water, or laid in wait for behind some declivity of the foreshore along which all gulls beat in heavy weather; but the third and fourth year birds are at all times scarce and shy, and to capture them is quite another matter. You will perhaps see one of these half-changed birds during a fortnight's wandering on the shore and sea, and the probability is that if he is not flying past you out of shot, he is viewing your movements from a safe distance, for few of the big









*Tacking to windward of Oakes.*



gulls are devoid of curiosity. How, then, are you going to get a shot at him? It seems impossible; but you will find it is not, if you will follow a plan that some years ago I discovered.<sup>1</sup> Taking advantage of his curiosity, you must lure him within shot in the manner I shall presently describe. Every shore-shooter will have noticed that when a tern or common gull is wounded by a shot, especially if he is only wing-tipped, any of his own or allied species who happen to be within sight will come and hover around their fallen comrade, flying so close to the gunner that he can soon get any specimen he requires. And so it is, in degree, with all the different species of the gull tribe, the nearness of their approach varying according to their relative tameness or timidity. The common black-headed gull, however, is very shy, and so are the great black-backs, especially if they have once been shot at. In the first flush of their curiosity, however, the latter will nearly always come right over within shot of the gunner, who, in anticipation of this, must crouch down and remain still till his chance comes. The newcomer may then be killed; but if this chance be lost a second one will rarely occur that day, for these big gulls are more cunning and more intelligent than any other species, and though they may continue to hover round after this, they will take good care to keep out of shot. If, therefore, you wish to procure some particular specimen, never think of shooting at him unless you are pretty sure of killing, for black-backs frequent the same bit of shore year after year, and you can nearly always make sure of finding him

<sup>1</sup> As this method of luring gulls is a particularly effective one, I venture to hope that none of my readers will make use of it, except for the purpose of securing specimens or destroying Great Black-backs that have become a pest.



there at another time. And now for my plan of luring the great black-back. First shoot a herring gull or young black-back, if possible, and carry it about with you as a bait. In winter it will last you for a month, and when you come across the bird you want, throw your bait high into the air, to windward, and into the sea if possible. If you cast it, as is much easier to do, *down wind*, the new-comer will swing round in the same direction and hover on stationary pinions just out of shot. Care, too, must be taken to cast your bait at the right moment, as well as in the right way, and the selection of this moment can only be learnt by experience. The best plan is to try to lure the black-back to the boat, and not to make the experiment from the beach, as all gulls will approach a man in a sailing boat far more readily than the same lying on the shore.

The following extract from my shooting diary may show how successful this method may be, and from what great distances the great black-back gull may be attracted, if the bait is cast exactly at the right moment.

‘. . . While passing the Graemsay lighthouse this morning I saw one of the two third-year’s black-backs I wished for. Twice have I lured him almost within shot, but dared not fire for fear of spoiling a better chance. To-day he rose at three hundred yards, heading out to sea; and knowing that in another moment his body and head would be at such an angle that he could not see us, I cast my dead bird at once on chance, and made Jimmy lay to. The black-back changed his course at once, and came “ha-ha-ing” towards us, giving me an easy shot and a clean kill. In the afternoon we skirted the “White Breasts” of Hoy, but saw nothing, and in

the evening held past the Clestron Skerries, hoping to see black-backs. We found four sitting on the water—two old birds and two young. They were shy, but I did not cast, as they were not what I wanted. Coming back past the “Holmes” I saw a black-back flying along the coast, fully half a mile away, and thinking that he might possibly be the other third-year bird I had previously seen in the bay, I cast high to attract him. His head must have been in the wrong direction at the moment, as he didn’t see the splash. Then, hauling in quickly, I threw up again. The result was wonderful: he spotted the flying carcase in a moment, and came hurrying out to us at top speed, starting his wild “Wy-au” by the way of grace before meat. Straight over the boat he came—high, but just within shot. My right rattled him severely, and as he tried to recover, my left laid him as dead as a stone. Not often have I got two such interesting specimens in a day.’

To my Naturalist friends I would say, that if they wish to obtain immature gulls in all stages of change, and of every species, except great black-backs, the best way to do so is to make for one of the regular fishing stations on the East Coast of Scotland, and go out at night with the deep-sea long-line boats.

I often used to go to the vicinity of the ‘Bell’ Rock with the Carnoustie fishermen, and much enjoyed these night trips. The boats start at 11 P.M., and reach the fishing ground, twenty or forty miles out, in a few hours. A buoy is put overboard on arrival, to mark the beginning of the long line, which is then payed out for two miles or so, side lines, a yard long with hooks and bait attached, being affixed to the long line. When all is at the bottom of the sea another buoy marks the farthest end of the line, and then you lay

to for half an hour, and let the fish 'tak a hud.' After this the sail is lowered, and one of the crew sets to haul in, whilst another stands by with the gaff for any unusually large fish, and two others sort the captured fish in different baskets, according to their quality and market value. It is great fun watching the different sea-fish coming to the surface, some fighting like the very mischief, others quiescent and stupid. A great skate or a big conger makes a terrific commotion, whilst the lethargic flounders and haddies hardly move until they are in the baskets. A small stove and frying-pan are meanwhile brought into action; and I can affirm, from repeated experience, that a man who has never eaten a haddock taken straight from the sea into the frying-pan has no idea how delicious that common fish really is.

To return to the scene immediately before us. As soon as the line begins to come in gulls of all sorts gather from every quarter, arriving at times by hundreds, and filling the air with their clamorous cries. Now cut up and cast some valueless fish overboard, and when the birds hover over their prey, pick out the one you want, shoot it, and let your retriever exercise his talent in bringing the bird to hand, otherwise it will be lost, as no fisherman can stop work in the middle of his more important occupation. A good retriever is an absolute necessity, as I found many a time in my roamings at sea with 'Jet.'

When I first went to the Orkneys, and, for several years afterwards, Loch Stenness and its surroundings—its barrens, its marshes, and its lakes—were one of my favourite hunting grounds, both for fishing and shooting. I think I may fairly claim to have been the first to discover the capital fishing to be had there, for

until the local hotelkeeper got to know of the big trout I had captured, no fly fisherman had ever been seen on the loch. It was quite by chance that I found it out. One August evening I saw a few good trout on the move in a small bay at the east end, and tried them, with the result that in half an hour I got six beauties, weighing over a pound each. After that I discovered another small bay three miles away, and used to fish there, but only when the trout came on feed of their own accord. What grand days John Oman and I had on the loch! The great lake and its surrounding moors were supposed not to yield any sport at all, so one could shoot and fish where one pleased, and rare fun it was to us to take advantage of this error. In August and September we would start early, to be in the east bay when the first rise came on, generally about 8.30 or 9 A.M. It was all over in half an hour, and then a Brown's phantom No. 5 was put on the rod, and off we went for the far end of the loch, where there was a splendid little snipe bog. On the way we generally got one really fine trout of from 2 to 5 lbs., and one day I captured in half an hour five, weighing respectively, 9 lbs., 6 lbs., 4 lbs.,  $3\frac{1}{2}$  lbs., and  $2\frac{1}{2}$  lbs.

As we trolled along I kept a sharp look-out into all the little bays on our right hand, and often detected and stalked a brace of mallard that were resting near the shore. Often, too, in the marsh, by the mill at the extreme head of the loch, I had grand sport. Snipe and duck were at times abundant, the latter frequently passing between the lake and the swamp.

My best day was in August 1885, when I secured ten trout, weighing altogether 13 lbs. (one of 5 lbs. with the minnow), seven

mallard and thirty snipe. This was a fine warm day after much rain, and the snipe sat well, and after leaving the marsh many settled out on the moor itself, where 'Jet' and I hunted them up in the afternoon.

The fishing of Loch Stenness, though somewhat famous, is now quite indifferent; it is not to be compared with that of a few years ago when I first went there. It has been overdone; and the owners of the snipe ground, too, finding that there is money to be made there, have naturally put a restriction on most of the shooters. Still there is good sport to be got to-day in the Northern Isles, if you know how and where to look for it.

I look back on those happy days in the Orkneys as the Arab wanderer must think of his lotus-scented garden, the British soldier of his home—days when, with good and gallant companions, who never harboured a mean thought or did an unworthy action, one sailed along, watching the birds basking in the sunshine and enjoying the *dolce-far-niente* existence that comes to us only 'in the morn and liquid dew of youth.'

I know it used to rain in torrents in those times, sometimes for days together, and the wind would howl and blow as it only can rage in those shelterless Isles. For weeks it was foggy, cold, and wretched as Southern Patagonia. But all that is difficult to realise now; for somehow I have forgotten the rain and only remember the sunshine, the green islands, and the crystal sea. The darkness and the blinding sleet have vanished in the Nirvana of those things which have passed away, and there only remains the vision of those Iron headlands crowned with golden spray; those



sea-kissed skerries sparkling in the summer sun, and the herds of seals lying there crowded and sleepy, as in some sheltered bower such as Kotick sought, beyond man's footsteps.



'EVENING BRINGS ALL THINGS HOME'



## APPENDIX

### *NOTES ON THE NORTHERN FIRTHS, AND OBSERVATIONS ON THE APPEARANCE OF THE BRITISH DUCKS*

Now let us take a general survey of Scotland, and see how wonderfully it is suited to the various kinds of wildfowl. The East Coast especially is indented with great salt estuaries, whose shallows, mud flats, and mussel banks are annually tenanted by big flights of ducks, geese and waders, which seek their food there; whilst the northern waters of the mainland and the coasts of the Orkneys and Shetlands are the homes of many of the rarer visitors from the Arctic wastes. Both for the shore and the punt gunner the East Coast of Scotland is the place for wildfowl; for, as a rule, all the West Coast estuaries and sea lochs are far too deep. As exceptions to this rule, however, may be mentioned the Firth of Clyde, which would be first-rate fowling ground were it not for its enormous shipping traffic, and the Solway Firth, in which fair sport can be had—especially at barnacle geese.

The following is a brief summary of the Eastern Firths and fowling grounds, gathered from personal experience.

#### THE FIRTH OF FORTH

The poorest of all, from a sporting point of view, although it supports one or two professional puntsmen in its upper waters, where sometimes large flights of golden plover appear. Insufficient feeding grounds, and excessive land and water traffic, are to a great extent the cause of this, for it is not until we ascend the river to a point above Blackness that there are any great mud flats. During two years spent at Edinburgh Castle, I used to cruise up the river and along the neighbouring coasts regularly once a week during the winter, and I never saw any great quantity of duck, though sometimes there

was a sprinkling of fowl such as mallard and wigeon. The somewhat rare velvet scoter, and an occasional bunch of pintail, were sometimes found resting on the sea opposite Musselburgh and Prestonpans.

#### THE EDEN ESTUARY

Just to the north of St. Andrews is the first of the important wildfowling grounds. The estuary itself is very short, extending only from Guard Bridge to the sandy points of Tents Muir on the north, and the golf links of St. Andrews on the south bank—a distance of not more than two and a half miles. Yet were it not now so harried as it is by shore-shooters it would be, for its size, probably the best fowling ground in Great Britain. For five years I kept a man and boats here, and always enjoyed excellent sport, shooting principally with the 8-bore and small shoulder guns; but this was before St. Andrews became a popular resort. The ground at low tide is intersected with hundreds of little channels, mud, and mussel banks, dear to the heart of the surface-feeders, whilst towards the sea there is a great feast spread for the more sea-loving species, in the shape of worms, sand-hoppers, and cockles. The sea-birds are so fond of this little shelter that, during westerly gales or severe frost, considerable numbers of all kinds spend the night in this estuary, and even prolong their stay till 9 or 10 o'clock in the day, when the bait-gatherers and gunners from St. Andrews warn them that it is time to be off to sea.

The photo. in Chapter V. shows something of the sport that can be obtained here with shoulder guns. Another photo. in the same chapter shows fewer birds, but a greater variety—souvenirs, these, of some of the many delightful days I have spent while gathering specimens for my collection on these waters. The Eden estuary is fluctuating as regards sport; sometimes for weeks together there is hardly a duck to be seen, and then, again, with the appearance of frost or heavy weather, it teems with wildfowl.<sup>1</sup>

The principal inhabitants in winter are wigeon, duck, teal, scaup, and sheldrake, golden-eyes (generally immatures), and a small bunch or two of

<sup>1</sup> A recent letter from Pinkney states that for the last two years the fowl on the Eden have become much wilder and scarcer owing to the constant persecution of two punt-gunners who are now established there.



TEAL AND SHOVELLERS ABOUT TO ALIGHT

pintail. At certain seasons black scoters come in from St. Andrews' Bay, where they are plentiful, whilst velvet scoter, though not very numerous, are found in the sea outside, from the estuary of the Eden to that of the Tay, eight miles to the north. Great quantities of bar-tailed godwits, knots, oyster-catchers and golden plover also frequent the outer and inner bays.

#### THE RIVER TAY AND ITS ESTUARY

The tides from the sea travel as far as Perth Bridge, a distance of about thirty-five miles up-river. Between these points comes the city of Dundee, which, for some distance, both above and below, effectually scares away anything in the shape of bird life.

Coming down stream from Perth the river rapidly widens out, and at Kinfauns begins a long series of reed beds and swamps on both sides.

On the south side these cease at Newburgh, opposite which is the little



island of Mugdrum, a favourite resort of duck and snipe at all seasons ; whilst on the north bank the great reed-beds cease to the south of Inchtute. In the wide channel between Newburgh and Errol large numbers of duck, teal, and wigeon are sometimes seen during the winter, but they are always shy, being constantly disturbed by flight-shooters. Only two puntsmen have attempted to gain a living here, and both had their boats smashed and sunk by local gunners, who took a great dislike to them.

Below Dundee, between the village of Monefeith and Carnoustie, on the Forfarshire coast, there is a nice broken shore, which is a good place for waders in the autumn, and in the winter I have seen a considerable number of long-tailed ducks feeding within sight of the shore. On the south side, between Tayport and the point of the Tents Muir salmon ground (a distance of about five miles), is found the best flats for waders in Scotland, and there I have obtained many of my rarest specimens, such as bar-tailed godwits, turnstones, sanderlings, and curlew sandpipers in summer plumage. Were it not so disturbed by mussel-gatherers and shore-shooters this ground would be an excellent place in which to obtain many of the sea-ducks. In severe weather I have seen the mussel bed at the Lucky Scaup simply covered with duck, wigeon, and scaup, together with a fair sprinkling of Brent geese ; but as this splendid feeding-ground is exposed to the open sea it is almost impossible to work a punt there. One winter I took a swivel gun there for a few days, but my expedition was not successful. I nearly got swamped, and never fired a shot.

#### THE MORAY FIRTH

This is an exposed and, in many parts, a somewhat dangerous firth. The north coast touching the rocky and wooded shores of the Black Isle is practically devoid of duck. On the southern shores, however, we have the bays of Campbelltown, Castle Stuart and Inverness, which comprise, perhaps, the best wigeon ground in Scotland. There are a good many mallard too, and in certain seasons, when much disturbed in the Cromarty Firth, large packs of Brent geese come down in search of the *Zostera marina*, which constitutes their principal food. True sea-ducks are scarce here, being limited to a few small parties of immature longtails found between Nairn and Fort George.

## THE BEAULY FIRTH

This admirably sheltered ground is, taking it all round, the best in Scotland for mallard and teal, which are constantly hunted by the gunners living at Clacnaharry. These men have to be extremely careful, and fire but few shots, as the explosion caused by the big gun makes such a noise, re-echoing among the hills from end to end. I have seen a greater number of golden-eyes in the Beauly Firth than anywhere else. A pack of as many as two hundred on the wing at once is no uncommon sight, and on a still day the singing noise produced by their beating wings can be heard at a great distance. At rare intervals a considerable number of pintails frequent this firth, and a few are killed at night. On still moonlight nights great numbers of duck may be heard, and a few seen passing high overhead between this firth and the Moray. They attract many shoulder gunners from Inverness.



MALLARD, TEAL, AND GOLDEN-EYE IN THE ACT OF RISING

## THE CROMARTY FIRTH

The waters of the Cromarty have long been famous as a wildfowl resort. Brent geese here are more numerous than anywhere else in Scotland. It is quite true that, some seasons ago, one gunner bagged in six weeks eighteen hundred birds, and quite lately I have known a man to kill two hundred in a week. I think, however, that the Brent are now very much shyer than they used to be; and, after the first fortnight, they can judge the range of the best punt gun with the greatest accuracy. Cromarty gunners have told me that, unless they do well with the birds on their first arrival, they have little chance of success during the rest of the season, unless severe weather comes to help them. Nowadays, too, if they are much shot at, many of the Brent geese leave for a time and go to the Moray, which, I am told, they used not to do in former years. The Cromarty is also a fine firth for wigeon.

## THE DORNOCH FIRTH

The ground some miles to the west of Tain is the best part of this little firth, for surface-feeding ducks, and here at the ferry point lives the only gunner who now gains a livelihood there by punting. For thirty-six years George Jennings, an Englishman, worked these waters with success, but he has now given up the chase.

The north shore is very good for various kinds of duck, and as no *zostera* grows there, the wigeon and pintail which frequent it have to live almost exclusively on small cockles, which gives the birds a rank and unpleasant flavour. Throughout Scotland, the long sandy shore to the west of Dornoch itself is about the last kind of ground where one would expect to find pintail; yet they are always there in winter. One day in 1892 (of course it was on a Sunday!) I counted, with the aid of a telescope, over eleven hundred pintail, sitting on the sandy beach in a line extending over a mile in length. This firth is both exposed and dangerous. The heavy ebb tides which follow the northern shore have to be carefully watched, as the slightest contrary breeze makes a sea at once.

Great numbers of sheldrake frequent this firth in winter (I once saw a flock of nearly five hundred).

Godwits and knots too are very numerous.

#### THE LITTLE FERRY

The sea off the coasts between the mouth of the Dornoch and the Little Ferry is the favourite home of that beautiful and merry sea-bird, the long-tailed duck. If, on a still winter day, the observer goes to some point



LONG-TAILED DUCKS ABOUT TO RISE

where a good view of the ocean may be obtained, he will see parties of longtails in every direction, flying, splashing and playing, and will hear the males calling to one another over its blue waters.

At certain seasons they ascend both the Dornoch and the Little Ferry.

The Little Ferry is the smallest but most beautiful of the East Coast inlets, its western end being closed by charmingly wooded mountains. At low water it is a perfect maze of little channels, and is much frequented by duck. There are thousands of oyster-catchers too, which, although not shootable fowl, keep passing almost without intermission the whole day, and make things lively with their constant screaming.

In the following rough impressions in pen and pencil I have endeavoured to give the young fowler certain *suggestions* whereby he may be able to recognise at a glance the various species of duck in flight or at rest ; when seen near, or at a distance. They may possibly be of some use to the young fowler in teaching him *what to look for*.

MALLARD.—Sit high and are generally seen in pairs, and rise again in groups. Are often careless as regards wind, and face any direction. The grey backs and dark heads of males show very distinctly. Feed principally ashore. Much scattered.

*Flight*.—Heavy and laboured to commence with. Do not rise so perpendicularly as other surface-feeding duck ; both duck and drake sometimes call on being disturbed. Once the necessary elevation is reached, flight both easy and rapid. They do not swing and turn so much as other species, nor do they, as a rule, descend so abruptly.

WIGEON.—Sit high. Sterns and tails exceptionally elevated. Look very dark on water, except the yellow top of the cock birds. Even these light-coloured males seem as dark as the females, unless the sun is shining directly upon them, and the fowler has his back to the light. Generally seen in close groups or a big pack. When feeding in shallows they face the wind and keep close together ; the sterns of the males glistening as they turn upside down to pull up the sea-grass. Are distinguished from teal by greater size and being less lethargic. One male in a pack also frequently utters a cheery 'Whee-oh !'

*Flight*.—On rising they ascend very abruptly, and sometimes in the direct perpendicular if the wind is strong, and turn frequently, when about to alight, the white breasts of all showing in unison. The first pack going to feed always swim in to feeding-ground, but others coming in after will fly directly to and alight amongst the first gathered birds.

PINTAIL.—Sit fairly scattered on the water, and not paired like mallard, generally face the wind like wigeon, sterns high and tails and long necks of males very noticeable when about to rise. During the day, when feeding ashore, they scatter more even than mallard, and the white on the necks of the males is very striking. On land they are very peaceful, but active when in search of food. When feeding in shallows they rather resemble wigeon at a distance,



as they constantly turn up their sterns to reach their food. Very silent birds, hardly ever calling.

*Flight.*—The flight may be said to be a compromise between mallard and wigeon; it is like both, yet not so heavy as the former or quite so



LONG-TAILED DUCKS RISING AND SHOWING THEIR SWALLOW-LIKE FLIGHT AND STRING-FORMATION

buoyant as the latter. They rise a good deal more easily than mallard, and are off at the first sign of danger.

*GADWALL.*—A dark duck, with a bright white splash on the wing, may describe the Gadwall drake. The female at a distance is quite indistinguishable from mallard duck. These birds sit high on the water, and are very quiet and listless during the day. Very silent, hardly ever uttering a sound, except in pairing season.

*Flight*.—Resembles wigeon. The white breasts are very noticeable when these ducks rise towards the spectator.



EIDERS RISING AND SHOWING 'PUNCHED' FORMATION

*TEAL*.—Sit very close, look very dark, and hold heads very low. In the daytime they are very quiet, a single male only calling occasionally.

*Flight*.—Rise very abruptly, more so than any other species, sometimes shooting straight up in the air. Can turn very rapidly, and when in flocks they wheel and swing frequently, if contemplating to settle; the shiny breasts and dark backs showing in quick succession. On rising female sometimes 'quacks.' Male, only very rarely, whistles; but when a pack are flying and intend to alight the male often calls.

*SHOVELLER*.—These ducks vary a good deal in their movements, according to season. If found in a flock in winter, during the daytime, they are often quiet and almost motionless, sitting paired, rather like mallard at rest; but late in the season they are often active during the day. Swimming about in pairs, heads held very low, males easily noticeable by their dark heads and snow-

white necks. They usually do not take alarm easily, being like teal in this respect, and not so shy as other surface-feeding ducks.

FLIGHT.—Shovellers are easily recognised when they rise from a marsh by the rattling noise which they make, and I have heard them designated as 'rattle-wings' in more than one locality. They ascend abruptly at first, and fly rather like wigeon, but more easily and gracefully. They are adepts at turning, and seem to enjoy in spring beating up and down for hours together over the marsh which they intend to make their summer home. They do not fly very high as a general rule.

The various illustrations of golden-eyes, longtails, eiders, black and velvet scoters, best describe the manner in which these species leave the water on being alarmed.



VELVET AND BLACK SCOTERS RISING



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